

**COLONIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE AFRICAN NOVEL,
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO
THE NOVELS OF CHINUA ACHEBE, WOLE SOYINKA,
NGUGI WA THIONGO AND MONGO BETI**



THESIS

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CONTENTS

PREFACE

CHAPTER I	INTRODUCTION : HOSTAGE TO HISTORY - AN ODYSSEY INTO THE COLONIAL MIND	...	1-34
CHAPTER II	CHINUA ACHEBE AND THE AESTHETICS OF COMMITMENT	...	35-88
CHAPTER III	WOLE SOYINKA : RELUCTANT REVOLUTIONARY TO THE THIRD WORLD REALIST	...	89-110
CHAPTER IV	NGUGI WA THIONGO : MARXISM AS PANACEA - FRANCHISING THE SUBALTERN	...	111-133
CHAPTER V	MONGO BETI : OF PRIGGISH PRIESTS AND BLUNDERING MISSIONARIES	...	134-156
CHAPTER VI	CONCLUSION	...	157-173
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	...	173-184

PREFACE

Already a substantial body of criticism exists on colonial consciousness and its bearings on the literature coming from former colonies. However, with the advent of the idea of Post-colonialism, matters have been unduly mixed up. This has been due to the crossing of the colonial discourse with the polemical emphasis of post-modern discourse.

Even the early criticism of the 'colonial text' – my thesis tries to show-suffered from a tendency among critics to privilege the colonial situation or colonial point-of-view and to read the novels in the light of a ready-made thesis. This amply served the premises and agenda of structuralism and post-structuralism.

My thesis starts with a fundamental presumption that there is an urgent need to interrogate this paradigm of colonial criticism which brackets the colonial writer ever before he has a chance to enunciate his creed through his creative writing.

This also explains the unevenness in the treatment of the different novels and the authors. It is because my methodology entails a detailed analysis of the central and canonical texts of the novelists under consideration, aided and illuminated by the not-so-central texts.

I thank God and my parents for the successful completion of this thesis, for together, they have made me what I am. I dedicate this thesis to the fond memory of my maternal grandfather Late Sri Saryoo

Prasad Singh. All through his life he has been a shaping influence on me, and the award of a doctoral degree to me was a dream he cherished to his last breath. I must record here the concern shown by my elder brother Shri Arun Kumar Singh on the delay in completion of my thesis. My wife Dipti, with her silent but patient disapproval of the delay, did more to hurry the completion of the thesis, than a whole battery of suggestions would have.

I owe much to Dr. Gangeshwar Rai, Professor & Head, Department of English, D.D.U. Gorakhpur University for ever being so kind, considerate and concerned, in matters academic as well as personal.

Words simply cannot register my gratitude and indebtedness to my supervisor, Dr. Madhusudan Prasad. It has been a long period of association in which he has subtly guided the development of my ideas and presided over the unfolding of my understanding of literature and literary discourse. Without his able supervision this thesis would not have materialised.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION :

HOSTAGE TO HISTORY -

AN ODYSSEY INTO THE COLONIAL MIND

HOSTAGE TO HISTORY : AN ODYSSEY INTO THE COLONIAL MIND

The contemporary African novel, in its variety and profundity, reach and range, texture and structure embodies myriad manifestations of colonial consciousness. In an endeavour to discharge his historical responsibility to restore history to his people, the colonial writer is caught between the claims of realism and distortion of perspective warranted by the exigencies of committed art and nationalist struggle. In post-independence period, as the excitement and bravado of the nationalist phase recedes, making room for the post-colonial mind to reorder its priorities, the writer finds himself freighted with the unenviable task of forging a secular present, demystified and demythologised. It is a consciousness conversant with the pitfalls of history, shaping a present pulsating with the possibilities of a vibrant future.

These various concerns of the colonial writer stem from the historically determined fact of his being a colonial subject and therefore every enquiry into the origin and shaping of colonial consciousness should begin with a consideration of colonialism itself.

Talking of the origins I begin with Aime' Cesaire's classic text *Discourse sur la colonialisme* where he defines colonialism in no uncertain terms :

What is colonialism in principle? We must agree on what it is not: neither evangelism nor a philanthropic

undertaking, neither a desire to roll back the frontiers of ignorance sickness or tyranny, nor the extension of the word of God or of law. It must be admitted once and for all, that the decisive action here is that of the adventurer and the pirate, the wholesale grocer and the armourer, the gold digger and the merchant, greed and force and following them the baleful shadow cast by a civilization which at a moment in history found itself obliged for internal reasons to give its antagonistic economies world wide rein for their rivalry.¹

It is against this background of distrust, hate and humiliation that we should situate the evolution of the colonial and post colonial consciousness in the African novel.

Now, colonial consciousness is the sum total of the attitudinal and belief component of the native's personality resulting from the heightened awareness of his colonial existence. It is the mind-set calibrating an individual's orientation towards the colonial system and its purveyors, the imperial masters. It is the consciousness arising out of the experience – personal or vicarious – of living under a state of seige.

Colonial consciousness is preeminently a rejectionist and antagonistic posture, for its purpose is to contradict the imperial lie and

¹ Aine Ce'saire, *Discourse sur le colonialisme*, Presence Africaine; Paris, 1958, p. 30.

expose the fraud foisted on the colonies. That is why before being a statement of a cause it is a counter statement; a stung sensibility cursed to perpetual vigil, the long drawn alertness leaving deep and indelible furrows on the sensibility. To understand this self-inflicted curse is to understand what colonialism does to its subjects. It drains the positives out of their lives. Human existence becomes incidental and derivative, the diabolic logic of imperialism transforming the subject into a predicate. The idea must wait till the image is cleansed.

The writing emerging out of this consciousness is an act of wresting embattled affirmations out of the pernicious postulates of a blinkered vision. It is thus that more often than not its accents are adversarial rather than collaborative or corroborative. It is the manifesto of a manacled culture and civilization, the response of a dispossessed and subjugated people to the brute and arbitrary exercise of superior military power operating in the garb of purposive humanism while in reality letting loose a reign of pillage and perfidy on a naive, gullible people.

Therefore, prior to beginning a detailed survey of the various shades of colonial consciousness as found in the African novel, we must take account of its determinants down the ages for in an understanding of its formative factors lies the clue to appreciating its denunciatory credo and its posture of protest. Only a detailed consideration of the institutions and practices which imperialism

deployed to hold fast its overseas dominions and buttress its fortunes will give us the true idea of the enormity of imperial misadventure.

Charles de Graft – Johnson of Ghana in his work *African Glory – The Story of Vanished Negro Civilizations*², has shown the power and glory of civilisation achieved by Africa south of the Sahara in the middle ages. He singles out for special study the three great medieval African empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai. He stresses the aspects in each which reveal among the African people those qualities which racist and colonialist literature has denied in Negroes. To the picture of the savage uncultured Negro, de Graft-Johnson contrasts those drawn from the accounts of Arab historians – Ibn Haukal, Al Bekri, Al Idrisi, Ibn Batuta, Ibn Khaldun and others – of the riches of the empire of Ghana, the splendours of the great Kankan Musa, the importance of the University of Timbuktu and the fame of its scholars, the exploits of the great conquerors such as Sundiata and Askia the Great. The defeat of the Songhai empire by Sultan Al Mansour's Moroccan army marked the end of the great Soudanese empires of the middle ages. De Graft remarks on the intellectual loss which this meant to West Africa :

The losses suffered by the Moroccan soldiers caused their leaders to adopt harsh measures against the city dwellers of the Songhai empire, particularly against the scholars of Timbuktu. All the scholars, lecturers, professors, jurists and

² De Graft-Johnson, John Coleman. *African Glory : The Story of Vanished Negro Civilization*, London : Watts, 1954.

theologians were driven in chains to Morocco. All their books were also transported to Morocco. Among those deported was professor Ahmed Baba, the distinguished historian of Sankore University (later The University of Timbuktu).³

The Ghanaian historian adds :

We get a picture of the importance attached to learning in the Songhai empire from a statement made by professor Baba while a prisoner in Morocco. He is reported to have said, "Of all my friends in Soudan it was I who owned the smallest library, and I possessed 1,600 volumes".⁴

African politicians have not been unaware of this picture of Africa which the historians have been elaborating. On the contrary, it has been a direct source of inspiration for many of them. As early as 1937, Nnamdi Azikiwe, future president of the Republic of Nigeria, wrote in *Renascent Africa* :⁵

Educate the renaissance African to be a man. Tell him that he has made definite contributions to history. Educate him to appreciate the fact that iron was discovered by Africans, that the conception of God was initiated by Africans, that Africans ruled

³ DeGraft Johnson, *African Glory: The Story of Vanished Negro Civilization*, pp. 117-18.

⁴ Ibid., p. 118.

⁵ Azikiwe, Nnamdi. *Renascent Africa* Accra, 1937; new edition (London: Frank Cass, 1968), p. 9.

the world from 765 to 713 BC, that while Europe slumbered during 'Dark Ages' a great civilisation flourished on the banks of the Niger extending from the salt mines of Therghazza in Morocco to lake Tchad Let him relish with the rest of the world that while Oxford and Cambridge were in their inchoate stages, the university of Sankore in Timbuktoo welcomed scholars from all over the muslim world'.

In similar vein, the motion for independence presented by Nkrumah to the Gold Coast Legislative Assembly in 1953, now known in Ghana as the 'motion of destiny, also contained an historical resume :

In the very early days of the Christian era, long before England had assumed any importance, long even before her people had united into a nation, our ancestors had attained a great empire which lasted until the eleventh century when it fell before the attacks of the Moors of the North. At its height that empire stretched from Timbuctoo to Bamako, and even as far as to the Atlantic. It is said that the inhabitants of Ghana wore garments of wool, cotton, silk and velvet. There was trade in copper, gold and textile and jewels and weapons of gold and silver were carried.⁶

⁶ Nkrumah, quoted in *Darkness and Light: An Anthology of African Writing* by Peggy Rutherford (London: Faith Press 1958), pp. 180-1, Published In USA as

Although, the identical views of the scholars and politicians were the result of the need to delve into the African past with a purpose to cobble up and project the African history in a manner which could withstand the western assault and denigration, my purpose here is to show the factors responsible for the decline and subjugation of such a buoyant civilisation.

African historians have attributed this to two causes: the geographic isolation of the continent (the desert barrier of the Sahara and the surf barrier which kept ships away for so long), and the demographic drain of the slave trade. Sheikh Anta Diop, from his analysis of the structure of the African society adds a third reason: Africa was spared revolutions because all social classes enjoyed a tolerable existence, including even the least fortunate. This very stability led to stagnation and explains African technological backwardness. Contrasting the Western situation against the African, Diop elaborates :

First there was the emergence of the feudal system of land ownership in the middle ages under the threat of the Nordic invasion. The peasant handed his land to the lord in exchange for protection. Later came the end of land tenure by free peasants; their arable holdings were expropriated by the nobility for sheep-rearing

following the development of wool industry. These despoiled peasants became the urban proletariat. From that time on, the situation was ripe for the birth of capitalism Nothing like this happened in black Africa, hence African economic life remained at the craftsman stage, guaranteed by the caste system and tied to an agricultural economy.⁷

Thus we see how Diop tracks down the backwardness to objective causes.

By far the most important factor determining the complex configuration, both social and psychic, of African life is the phenomenon of slavery and slave trade. This inhuman practice was in existence from around middle of the fifteenth century and continued unabated for almost three centuries and a half. Dr. W.E.B. DuBois – the American Negro sociologist generally regarded as ‘the father of panafricanism’ – estimated that the slave trade cost Africa some hundred million inhabitants. De Graft-Johnson devotes one long chapter to slavery in his *African Glory* and sums up the horrific consequences for Africa:

Tribal life was broken up or undermined and millions of detribalised Africans were let loose upon each other Tribes had to supply slaves or be sold as slaves themselves. Violence brutality, and ferocity became the necessities of survival.

⁷ Diop, Sheik Anta, *L'Afrique noire pre-coloniale*, Paris: Presence Africaine, 1960, p. 109.

The stockades of grinning skulls, the selling of one's own children as slaves, the unprecedented human sacrifices were all the sequel to the grand finale, the rape of African culture and civilisation.⁸

Sartre in his "Orphee noir" commentes on the far reaching effects of slavery:

It was during the centuries of slavery that Negroes drank the cup of bitterness to the dregs. Slavery is a fact of the past which neither present day authors nor their fathers knew personally. But it is also a gigantic nightmare from which even the youngest are not certain they have awakened completely.⁹

And the black Cuban poet Nicolas Guillen bears testimony :

Yo Soy tambien el neito
bisnieto,
tataranieto de un esclavo.
(I am the son, the great grandson, and the great-
great grandson of a slave.)¹⁰

⁸ DeGraft Johnson. *African Glory: the Story of Vanished Negro Civilizations*, London: Watts 1954, p. 153.

⁹ Nicolas Guillen, *Lapaloma de vuela popular*, Buenos Aires 1948 quoted in *The Literature and Thought of Modern Africa* by Claude Wauthier, London: Heinemann, 1978, p. 146.

¹⁰ Senghor, Leopold Sedar, ed. *Anthologie de la nouvelle poesie nigre et malgache*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948, p. 36.

The dubious role played by the church and the missionaries in the colonies in perpetuating slavery is another of those factors which etched the contours of colonial consciousness.

When the 'Act' separating church and state was passed in France in 1905, the colonies were exempted. It was recognised that the conversion of Africans undertaken by the missionaries was to the advantage of colonialism. This was true not only of France, and all over Asia and Africa missionaries from every European power had followed or preceded the colonial conquest. When the 1885, Treaty of Berlin was revised in 1919 an article guaranteeing liberty of conscience and free profession of all sects affirmed the missionaries' right to enter, travel over and live in the African continent. Beginning in 1792, several missionaries founded societies. The Wesleyan Missionary Society began activities in Sierra Leone in 1795 and extended to Gambia (1821), Ghana (1834) and Yoruba (1841). The Church Missionary Society began its operations in 1806. Prof. C.P. Groves in *The Planting of Christianity in Africa* remarks:

The Church was recognised as a pillar of the state so that to propagate the Christian faith was at the same time to consolidate the imperial power. In the Roman times Justinian pursued the policy in Africa of encouraging to become christians all those chiefs and kings who sought his good will. In the case of native rulers, an investiture with robes of

office and the bestowal of honorific titles went with the change Religious propaganda for imperial expansion was the policy.¹¹

As for the colonial period Lothrop Stoddard writing in 1920 in his *The Rising Tide of Colour* had said :

Certainly, all white men, whether professing Christians or not should welcome the success of missionary efforts in Africa. The degrading fetishism and demonology which sum up the native pagan cults cannot stand and all Negroes will some day be either Christians or Moslems. In so far as he is christianized, the Negro's savage instincts will be restrained and he will be disposed to acquiesce in white tutelage.¹²

However, the missionaries' own evidence is even more revealing for Negro intellectuals seeking to prove collusion between Christianity and colonialism. De Graft-Johnson draws on the Negro anthology by Raymond Michelet¹³ to show the impressions of a protestant missionary, Henri Junod: "I speak with resignation. Despite all that has been written on the fundamental axiom of the absolute equality of mankind, the blacks are an inferior race, a race made to serve".¹⁴ Not only this. J.A.J. Utting in *The Story of Sierra Leone* had written : "I know that our divines

¹¹ Quoted by De Graft Johnson in *The African Glory*, *ibid.*, p. 49.

¹² Quoted by De Graft Johnson in *The African Glory*, p. 50.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

and learned men cannot decide whether or not they (the Negroes) have souls. And, of course, if they have not they are as well treated as other animals but all the same I am sorry for them. In this context Chinua Achebe interestingly commented that while "The churchmen were doubting the existence of the black man's soul the black man's body was fetching high prices in the market place".¹⁶

Allied to the slave trade and shaping the antagonistic consciousness of the native intellectual was the negrophobia found in the scriptures in that the black races were seen as descendants of Ham, the black son of Noah and thus perpetually cursed to be saved only by baptism.

The American Negro writer James Baldwin commenting on his loss of faith wrote:¹⁷

I realised that the Bible had been written by white men. I knew that, according to many Christians, I was a descendant of Ham, who had been cursed, and that I was therefore predestined to be a slave I denounce the remarkable arrogance that assumed the ways and morals of others to be inferior to those of Christians and that they therefore had every right and could use any means to change them It is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a

¹⁶ Chinua Achebe in 'African Literature as Restoration of Celebration' in *Kunapipi* ed. Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford, Vol. XII, No. 2, 1990. (Special issue in celebration of Chinua Achebe).

¹⁷ Baldwin, James, *The Fire Next Time*, pp. 46-56 quoted in *The African Glory* by De Graft Johnson, p. 211.

truly moral human being must first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes and hypocrisies of the Christian Church.

The prohibitions about which Baldwin is speaking are also the concern of Kenneth Kaunda in *Zambia Shall Be Free*.¹⁷ The author is particularly hostile to the segregated religious services, separating whites from blacks and to the fact that African priests are treated as inferior. These sentiments and severe judgements are echoed in the Negro poetry. The American Negro Langston Hughes, is particularly scathing:¹⁸

O, precious Name of Jesus in that day!
That day is past.
I know full well now
Jesus could not die for me -
That only my own hands,
Dark as the earth
Can make my earth-dark body free.

In the Haitian poet Jacques Roumain the tone is violent :

But Christ today is in the house of the thieves, and
in the cathedrals his arms cast the long shadow of
the vulture; and in the cellars of the monasteries
the priest counts the interest on thirty pieces of

¹⁷ Quoted by Claude Wauthier in *The Literature and Thought of Modern Africa*, p. 212.

¹⁸ Langston Hughes in *Presence Africaine*, Vol. VI, p. 165.

silver and the church bells spit death at the hungry
multitudes.¹⁹

It was thus that the resolution presented by the West African delegates to the sixth Pan-African Congress in Manchester in 1945 stated unequivocally that organised Christianity in West Africa "is identified with the political and economic exploitation of the West African people by the foreign powers".²⁰

Thus we see how from the very beginning, the African intellectual had to face and come to terms with the phenomenon of 'denial of presence'. We must here admit straightway that presence, visibility and legitimacy are crucial issues in the post colonial African fiction. In fact if any one issue could define, however tentatively, the reigning concern of the African novel it would be none other than the precariousness of black existence. Subjugation, displacement and depersonalization were the concomitants of colonialism.

From the period of 'Slave Trade', the catalogue of what Africa and Africans have been said not to have is quite extensive. We have mentioned the controversy about human soul. Lesser attributes such as culture and religion were debated and generally found wanting as far as Africa was concerned.

¹⁹ Senghor, Leopold ed. *Anthologie de la nouvelle poesie*, p. 120.

²⁰ Appendix to Nkrumah, Kwame. *Towards Colonial Freedom*. London : Farleigh Press, 1947.

The imperialists who colonized Africa from the sixteenth century onwards were convinced of the barbarism of the areas that had come under their control. This was inevitably so given their western yardstick for the measurement of culture and civilization. As far as they were concerned the foremost ingredients of civilization were technological advancement and literacy.

Deficiency in these lead to one being classified as primitive. This conviction enabled them to give an altruistic halo to their colonizing mission; an expansionist venture into Africa which was basically materialistic or political could be disguised as missionary activity designed to bring light to a benighted people. The consequence of this missionary imperialist activity was that indigenous African culture was devalued, traditional religion came to be equated with paganism and traditional education was regarded as the perpetration of the most barbarous, unhygienic and indecent practices.

Frantz Fanon categorically underlines this facet :

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic it turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.

For colonialism this vast continent was the haunt of savages, a country riddled with superstitions

and fanaticism, destined for contempt, weighted down by the curse of God, a country of cannibals.²¹

As against this attempt at cultural dispossession the African writer comes up with his version of the African identity. But before we go into a discussion of this assertion of the past which we know by the name of 'Negritude' we must differentiate at the outset between the French and the English colonies. This is so because the mode of governance in the two being different the response to each varies in essentials.

The English administrators were generally content with exercising political military and administrative control leaving the civilizing mission to the missionaries whom they generally regarded with a certain amused tolerance. They preferred the system of indirect rule, making use of the traditional rulers whom they were quite content to leave to exercise their functions within their traditional milieu.

On the other hand, as Eustace Palmer²² has shown, the French practiced a policy of assimilation by means of which the cream of African traditional society were put through a thoroughly French system of education with a view to making them 'black Frenchmen.' School children in francophone territories were taught to recite that their ancestors were Gauls just like French children. However, during and after their studies in France, francophone intellectuals discovered that

²¹ Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York : Grove Press, 1963, p. 154.

²² Eustace Palmer, *The Growth of the African Novel*, London : Heinemann Educational Books Inc, 1979, p. 125.

in spite of their impeccably French education and their genuine abilities they were not totally accepted as Frenchmen. But simultaneously they discovered to their dismay that they had been alienated from their roots.

They were therefore, caught in a cruel dilemma leading to a reaction against the system which produced them and a determined struggle to rediscover their lost identity. Hence their association with the concept of Negritude.

The central feature of the Negritude concept was its emphasis on the beauty, dignity and excellence of black African life and culture. Negritude writers generally glorified Africa to the extent, at times, of over idealizing her and blinding themselves to those aspects of African history and society which might not be entirely pleasant. Perhaps they felt that this was the only way in which they could counteract the imperialist tendency to devalue African traditional life. They extolled the beauty of the Negro physique and the excellence of Negro womanhood and against western emphasis on rationality and intellect they pitted a highly developed emotional and intuitive life.

Their reasoning has been thus : if the coloniser bases his rights of conquest principally on a civilizing mission dogmatically presupposing the Negro's cultural inferiority, then he must be fought on his own ground and shown that the Negro is in no way his intellectual inferior. This is the underlying theme of all African research in the fields of ethnology and history, as well as of the efforts to revive her oral

literature. The pilgrimage back to the origins of African culture is often just another aspect of the fight for independence.

The development of the work of Negro intellectuals can be summarised as a kind of dialectic progression : the first step was to show the equal worth of African and European civilizations; the second was to determine a difference of essence between the two civilizations, and finally the rejection of assimilation. They begin by showing that as in Europe, African society was democratic, and that African folklore is the expression of a rich oral literature. Bernard Dadie complains :

Over hasty observers unaware of our history have unfortunately not always penetrated further than the sordid appearance of our straw huts. They have not known how to read the hoary old man sitting at the threshold of these straw huts.²³

African intellectuals draw attention to the moral range of their stories, legends and proverbs. Bernard Dadie maintains that :

They are a lesson in prudence, generosity, patience and wisdom indispensable to the guidance of mankind and the stability of society. It is through the legends that the elders teach the young easily remembered lessons on the cosmogony, tribal history, social laws and

²³ Bernard Dadie, "Le Role de la legende dans la culture populaire des noirs d'Afrique", quoted by Claude Wauthier in *The Literature and Thought of Modern Africa*, Heinemann, London, 1978, p. 65.

structures, religious beliefs economics, relations with other tribes, the lives of the heroes of fables, the evolution of civilization and the totemic relationship between an animal and a clan.²⁴

Mamby Sidibe is equally emphatic about the value of oral literature :

In a society with no alphabet and starting out with no written literature, oral folklore has absorbed the treasures which in other countries would have been confided to books: a whole exuberant tradition consisting of history, religion, moral instruction, satire, and psychological observation. This rich store, handed down through the ages, ensures for Africa the permanence of its institutions which exotic trappings may sometimes hide but never destroy.²⁵

This traditional wisdom is carried through the generations by the *griots*. A *griot* is both a guardian of tradition, a man who is often well-born and a story teller who entertains. "They are living archives, the annalists endowed with prodigious memories, a source of African history."²⁶ However, it is interesting to note that tradition forbade story telling or listening to griots before nightfall in order not to encroach on the day's work.

²⁴ Claude Wautheir, *Ibid.*, p. 67.

²⁵ Claude Wautheir, *The Literature and Thought of Modern Africa*, p. 76.

²⁶ Claude Wautheir, *Ibid.*, p. 80.

Linguistic specialists on Africa have also come forward to attack preconceived notions on the poverty of vocabulary in African languages. Theodor Monod writes :

The first navigators regarded Hottentot speech as barely different from the barking of dogs. We are making an equally elementary mistake when we class African Negro languages as 'primitive' taking this adjective as synonymous to 'simple'. Is a language simple when, like Nama, it has ten words for our pronoun 'us', four verbs meaning 'to eat' according to what one is eating and forty expressions for man's various gaits. Is a language simple when in place of our adjective 'big' it has 123 words as in Nupe or 311 as in Hausa?²⁷

Now, as we have seen largely because of their very different historical situation the anglophone writers were little affected by the Negritude movement. Most of them were locally educated young men and though fully conscious of the effect of imperialist practices on traditional life they did not feel as alienated from their cultural roots as their francophone counterparts.

Out of the four novelists that I have chosen for detailed study only one - Mongo Beti of Cameroon is francophone, the other three;

²⁷ Quoted by Claude Wauthier in *The Literature and Thought of Modern Africa*, London : Heinemann, p. 262.

Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Ngugi Wa Thiongo being anglophone.

Both Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka have spoken openly against Negritude. The view generally held is that Negritude is an out dated concept which may have excellently served its purpose for the first generation of African intellectuals, historians and ethnologists as a rallying force for the restoration of a proper perspective on African life but has outlived its usefulness. As far as the African intellectual is concerned the view holds that the emphasis today should be on the need to examine critically those tendencies which may be leading to a debasement of standards and values in contemporary Africa.

For this reason both Franz Fanon and Ezekiel Mphahlele adopt a cautious attitude towards Negritude and while appreciating the causes which prompted the rise of Negritude they reject it as an unviable stance in context of the problems faced by the African continent. According to Mphahlele, the building of a mystique of the Negro personality is as detrimental to art as is its eventual lapse into a mere posture and exoticism. Both these positions compromise the truth-claim of art and Mphahlele calls such preoccupation with Negritude, the 'anthropological creepy-crawly'.²⁶

In the immediate context of our consideration of Negritude and its waning fortunes in the post colonial African novel let us chart the

²⁶ Claude Wauthier, *Ibid.*, p. 176.

course of Negritude in some detail in the works of African novelists other than the four we have chosen for special reference. It is in their widely different treatment of the Negritude theme that these novelists demonstrate the various shades of colonial consciousness. Cyprian Ekwensi of Nigeria is the most obvious choice to begin with and the reason is not far to seek.

Cyprian Ekwensi

Ekwensi is widely regarded as the father of African novel as his work *People of the City* (1954)²⁰ was the first west African novel worth the name to be published in English. Ekwensi's reigning concern is with the problems of the city. When he started writing in the late 1940s and early 1950s the problems of urbanization in African states were just beginning to make themselves felt. The rapid expansion of the cities and the population explosion which accompanied this is one aspect of the adjustment which the African societies had to undergo.

The breakdown of traditional societies, the introduction of cash based economy, the growth of education and the centralization of administration all lead inevitably to a drift from the country side to the growing cities. Hence arise the now familiar social problems like juvenile delinquency, prostitution, organized crime, housing rackets, filth and squalor. As Eustace Palmer elaborates, "The rural innocent, in particular who is ignorant of the qualities needed to survive in the hot-

²⁰ Cyprian Ekwensi, *People of the City*, London : Heinemann, 1954.

house that is the city and who is quite often inadequately equipped as far as education is concerned to qualify for the more lucrative jobs the city offers, easily becomes a prey for the smart boys, the pimps, the politicians in need of thugs or mistresses."³⁰

Inevitably Ekwensi contrasts life in the city with life in the country and proceeds to idealize the latter. Since traditional taboos still largely obtain in the country, values such as honesty, industry, and respect for the elders, ancestors and Gods are held in the high regard, the countryside is consequently seen as the repository of virtue while the city thrives on vice. Ekwensi's second novel *Jagua Nana* (1961)³¹ is an advance study of the same problem.

T.M. Aluko

T.M. Aluko studied engineering in England in the late 1940s, eventually becoming one of the first professionally qualified Nigerians to hold a top post in the civil service. Aluko is not concerned with the traumatic consequences of the impact of western imperialism on African life. He confines himself to the more modern period immediately preceding and succeeding independence. His theme basically is the clash between tradition and modernity but the opponents of traditionalism here are not the white administrators who are largely spectators in the drama but mainly the western-educated African professionals – doctors engineers, lawyers and civil servants.

³⁰ Eustace Palmer, *The Growth of the African Novel*, London : Heinemann, 1979, p. 41.

³¹ Cyprian Ekwensi, *Jagua Nana*, London : Heinemann.

Aluko sees it as both inevitable and necessary precisely because for him there is little that is dignified or majestic about traditional life. Two of his best novels are *One Man, One Matchet*²² and *Kinsman and Foreman*²³. Two major problems confront the newly arrived young man who is given a responsible position in his society. He has to adjust himself once more to the traditional ways of his society and he has to battle against unprogressive tendencies such as bribery and corruption. Both Ekwensi and Aluko are anglophone writers and therefore their attitude to Negritude is at best indifferent and ambiguous. The francophones show a vehemence and stridency of tone which, with the possible exception of Armah is almost absent from anglophone works.

Ferdinand Oyono

Oyono like Beti is a cameroonian and francophone. His work is almost entirely devoted to the presentation of the ruthlessness of the French administration in those territories over which they had sway. Where Mongo Beti and Hamidou Kane are largely concerned with the cultural implications of French imperialism, Oyono is preoccupied with the social and political. Both of his novels *The Old Man and the Medal*²⁴ and the *Houseboy*²⁵ are documents in the exposure of the Roman Catholic Church and the political administration. By the use of brilliant wit and cutting sarcasm he rips through the benevolent exterior of Church and administration to expose the sordid realities beneath. When

²² T.M. Aluko, *One Man One Matchet*, London :

²³ T.M. Aluko, *Kinsman and Foreman*, London :

²⁴ Ferdinand Oyono, *The Old Man and the Medal*, London : Heinemann, 1969.

²⁵ Ferdinand Oyono, *Houseboy*, London : Heinemann.

Meka (The Old Man of the title) decides to gift away his piece of ancestral land to the church it is not so much out of religious zeal as of naivette. Oyono's tone trembles with irony and satire as he presents the scene :

He had the special grace to be the owner of a piece of land, which, one fine morning, had proved pleasing to the eye of the Lord. A white priest had revealed his divine destiny to him. How could he go against the will of the Lord-who-giveth? Meka, who in the meanwhile had been reborn in baptism, humbled himself before the messenger of the almighty For the Christians of Doum, Meka was the great favourite in the Paradise stakes, one of those rare mortals who would have no more than a mere appearance to put in at purgatory.³⁶

Yambo Oulouguem

Oulouguem is a Malian and a francophone, however, unlike other francophone writers like Mongo Beti and Ferdinand Oyono, Oulouguem aims to show in one comprehensive contemplation of Africa's plight that oppression on the continent has not merely been the consequence of Imperialist occupation. It has been Africa's legacy; the consequence of exploitation not just by whites but by Arabs, whites and black notables.

³⁶ Ferdinand Oyono, *The Old Man and the Medal*, London : Heinemann, 1969, p. 10.

Oulouguem seeks to dispel all the myths about Africa and to reveal the candid truth.

He goes against conventional wisdom which normally blames the imperialists for the disasters of Africa. He shows instead that the African past has been astonishingly murky and that Africans themselves must shoulder a large proportion of the blame for the disasters that have always overwhelmed the continent.

Oulouguem's *Bound to Violence*²⁷ starts appropriately with a presentation of the history of the Nakem Empire going back to the year 1202. The picture is far from flattering. The Nakem history turns out to be a record of the worst imaginable chaos, degradation, wanton carnage and maddening cruelty. The legendary Saifs themselves with a combination of Jewish, negro and Arab blood running in their veins seem to demonstrate the worst qualities of all three peoples. It is an age of feudalism and slavery, with the Saifs turning out to be the worst slave owners and traders in history, their chief victims being the blacks :

Amidst the diabolical jubilation of priest and merchant, niggers were clubbed, stockpiled, sold, haggled over, adjudicated, flogged, bound and delivered – with attentive, studied contempt – to the Portuguese, the Spaniards, the Arabs (on the East and North coast), and to the French, Dutch

²⁷ Yambo Oulouguem, *Bound to Violence*, London : Heinemann.

and English (West coast) and so scattered to the winds.

A hundred million of the damned were carried away bound in bundles of six, shorn of all human dignity they were flung into the ship. A single hour in that pestilential hole, in that orgy of fever, starvation, vermin, beriberi, scurvy, suffocation and misery would have left no man unscathed. Thirty percent died on route. Slaves who were as sick as a goat in labour were thrown to the sharks.

Newborns incurred the same fate.³⁸

The history of the Saifs is also a fearful story of the blood thirsty struggle for power, of family feuds, intrigues and eventual disintegration. It is a history in which on the death of a Saif one claimant to the throne marries all his father's four wives including his own mother, in order to strengthen his claim and throws his brother, the legitimate heir, into a dungeon where he dies. After the death of Saif-Al-Hiet a period of disintegration and fragmentation of authority sets in, with regimes succeeding each other with astonishing rapidity. Indeed the colonial conquest was facilitated by this disintegration.

The Saifs seem to be pastmasters at the art of discovering the most ingenious methods of torture and brutality unleashing a reign of terror and suffering on their unsuspecting subjects. We hear of

³⁸ Yambo Oulougum, *Ibid.*, p. 68.

multitude of men being immured alive having been smeared with the blood of butchered children and disembowelled mothers; of seventeen fetuses expelled from the gaping entrails of mothers in death agony.

In this novel the author uses violence in much the same way as Armah and Swift use images of filth and obscenity - to shock us into a realization of the repulsiveness of violence and its presence in African society. There can be little doubt about Oulougum's success in the demonstration of his main theme, the exploitation of Africans by African notables and Arab conquerors.

Ayi Kwei Armah

Armah's similarity with Oulougum is obvious. But where the anti-Negritudist Malian author seeks to dispel all the myths about African history declaring that black notables no less than Arab and European conquerors and imperialists were responsible for the degradation of the continent; Armah adopts an essentially Negritudist position, the net effect of his presentation being the total condemnation of the Arabs and Europeans as the destroyers of the pristine values of a pure Africa.

While Armah's first three novels; *The Beautiful Ones Are not Yet Born*³⁹, *Fragments*⁴⁰ and *Why Are We So Blest?*⁴¹ sought to expose political and social corruption in contemporary Ghana, his fourth novel

³⁹ Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, London, Heinemann.

⁴⁰ Ayi Kwei Armah, *Fragments*, London, Heinemann.

⁴¹ Ayi Kwei Armah, *Why Are We So Blest*, London, Heinemann.

*Two Thousand Seasons*⁴² in one majestic sweep of Africa's history delves into the past and seeks to demonstrate how those pure African values which existed in an almost prehistoric past were destroyed through the exploits of Arab 'predators' and European 'destroyers'.

Armah's stand is unique and a healthy departure from the school of thought (not a very uncommon feature of post-colonial consciousness) which proves the credentials of African thought and culture by fitting it into Eurocentric categories. Thus, Bolaji Idowu in his otherwise excellent work *Olodumare : God in Yoruba Belief*⁴³ makes a point of proving that the Yoruba do believe in a Supreme Deity with the inference that this constitutes proof of the high stage of development of the Yoruba people. Against all such attempts to smuggle meaning into and prestige for the indigenous culture Armah is up in arms :

We are not stunted in spirit, we are not Europeans,
we are not Christians that we should invent fables
a child would laugh at and harden our eyes to
preach them as truth. We are not so warped in
soul, we are not Arabs, we are not muslims to
fabricate a desert god chanting madness in the
wilderness and call our creature creator. That is
not our way.⁴⁴

⁴² Ayi Kwei Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons*, London, Heinemann.

⁴³ Bolaji Idowu, London : Longman, 1982.

⁴⁴ Ayi Kwei Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons*, Ibid., p. 4.

Against this Armah posits a genuine, pure system of values or way of life which he consistently refers to as 'the way'; 'our way': The main characteristic of this authentic African way is what Armah refers to as reciprocity – the principle of mutual giving and receiving. 'The way' has its own clearly defined political and religious systems. As far as the political organization is concerned it emerges as a 'communitistic egalitarian system with each participant working together with all others for the welfare of the whole.

Indeed the system of 'the way' laid tremendous emphasis on 'connectedness', that is meaningful communication or an awareness of relationships. 'The way' involved 'connected sight', 'connected thinking' – a vision, a system of thought and action that focuses on the entire pattern; sees the interrelationship between past, present and future. It concerns itself not just with the expediencies of the present, but with the prophecies of the past and the lessons of history. The reverse is fractured vision and thinking which is associated with the white predators and therefore with destruction and death.

There is a sense in which Armah is almost impatient with the present which he refers to on one occasion as 'the senseless present' whose sounds are merely a 'brazen cacophony'. Instead he emphasizes the need to go back to origins and determining future purposes: 'A people losing sight of origins is dead. A people deaf to purposes are lost'.

Armah goes much further than avowedly Negritudist writers such as Camara Laye and Kane who present Islam as a traditional African religion accepted by the people. He groups Islam with Christianity as 'shrieking theologies' with which the Arab predators and white destroyers assail the black people alike.

Sembene Ousmane

Sembene Ousmane from Senegal seems to have more in common with anglophone writers than with his francophone compatriots. In the first place he has little patience with Negritude, preferring to deal with the anti-colonial problem on the level of political rather than cultural polemics. Perhaps Ousmane's humble origins explain this attitude towards Negritude as it was a movement of the elite and the masses were always more or less indifferent to it.

National leaders with seats in the French Chamber of Deputies or even in the French cabinet were not likely to press vehemently for independence. It is now fairly established that francophone intellectuals were much more concerned with the superimposition of an alien culture and the consequent erosion of the indigenous personality than with political domination. Thus, with the possible exception of Guinea, the anti-imperialist struggle was much more strident in Anglophone than in francophone Africa.

Ousmane is one of the few francophone writers to turn his attention to the corruption and decadence threatening modern African society :

I also know and so do you, that in the past as well as in the present there have been many anonymous heroic actions among us. But not everything we have done has been heroic The debility of AFRICAN MAN - which we call our AFRICANITY, our NEGRITUDE, and which instead of fostering the subjection of nature by science, upholds oppression and engenders venality, nepotism, intrigue and all those weaknesses with which we try to conceal the base instincts of man (may at least one of us shout it out before he dies) - is the great defect of our time.⁴⁵

Such a declaration puts Ousmane in line with the mainstream of contemporary anglophone writing and his exposure of the corruption and incompetence engendered by a dogged bureaucratic system is as revealing as Achebe's and Soyinka's.

*God's Bits of Wood*⁴⁶ (1970) is Ousmane's masterpiece. It is a powerful reconstruction of the strike by African railway workers in 1947. According to Soyinka, "It is a work which reaches beyond mere narrative in its meticulous delineation of human strengths and weaknesses, heroism and communal solidarity and in the process it attains epic levels."⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Sembene Ousmane, *White Genesis*, London : Heinemann, 1972, pp. 5-6.

⁴⁶ Sembene Ousmane, *God's Bits of Wood*, London : Heinemann, 1970.

⁴⁷ Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, London : Cambridge University Press, 1976.

The novel encompasses the same span as Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*; like that novel it is about the mobilization of a whole people into political consciousness. The degradation against which the people are fighting is rendered graphically by Ousmane. This is the railway junction of Thies :

Hovels. A few rickety shacks, some upturned tombs, walls of bamboo or millet stocks, iron barbs and rotting fences. Thies: a vast uncertain plain where all the rot of the city has gathered Constantly hungry, naked children with sunken chests and swollen bellies argued with the vultures.⁴⁶

The privation and suffering of the striking railway men and the brutality of the authorities are all rendered with tremendous power. The conflict is seen by all as a racial confrontation between the people and the *toubabs*, the white authorities. The 'Railway', spanning as it does almost the whole of French West Africa from Bamako to Dakar, serves as a unifying force and reinforces the novel's epic scale suggesting a ground swell of resistance to the French imperialists not just in Senegal but throughout the region.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the drive towards emancipation is spearheaded by the railwaymen. When they force every machine within a thousand miles to halt, they become aware of their strength.

⁴⁶ Sambene Ousmane, *God's Bits of Wood*, p. 27.

As our survey of the African novel has shown, colonial consciousness assumes different hues and forms and accordingly different aspects of colonial rule, with varying focus and emphasis, come up for treatment in the African novel. The African novelist is always conscious of his peculiar position as a witness to the sordid drama of colonial advance and appropriation. But he is not just a witness. He is at the same time deeply implicated in the enactment and accosts imperialism from the standpoint of affront and injury.

As colonialism made its forays in the African heartland it spelled the doom of traditional order. So the theme of clash between tradition and modernity figures predominantly in the African novel. Other themes like the problem of urbanization and the trauma of the individual torn between contending value systems form the staple. The influence of Negritude is pervasive and the African novel as we have seen it either approves of negritude or bypasses and debunks it. Yet it must be squarely acknowledged that the African novel before the advent of Chinua Achebe, is still in search of its metier.

CHAPTER II

CHINUA ACHEBE

AND THE

AESTHETICS OF COMMITMENT

CHINUA ACHEBE AND THE AESTHETICS OF COMMITMENT

History put on Achebe's shoulders a unique responsibility and Achebe, fortunately for African literature, proved equal to the task. The responsibility was to set the scene, to lay out the agenda and to demarcate the frontiers across which the great battle against imperialist lies would be fought. In doing this Achebe was certain about one thing. If you are fighting against misrepresentation, you must on your part resist all temptation to the same. As Achebe pointed out in an interview with Ernest Emenyonu¹:

There were certainly faults in the Igbo system that were depicted in *Things Fall Apart*. There is no reason for instance for twins to be thrown away. But if you take a position for or against then you find yourself defending the throwing away of twins or else you say that Africa is barbarism which appears to be the new trend today among some black writers and they are immediately applauded by whites because it gives them an easy conscience after all this period of doubt.

¹ Emenyonu Ernest and Pat Emenyonu, *Achebe : Accountable to Our Society*. *Africa Report* 17.5 (1972), p. 21-27. Quoted by Anuradha Dingwaney Needham in "Articulating the Post-Colonial Writer's Social Responsibilities : The Example of Chinua Achebe" in Bernth Lindfors and Bala Kothandaraman, *South Asian Responses to Chinua Achebe*, New Delhi : Prestige Books International, 1993, p.

Professedly then, Achebe eschews both these positions which amount to carrying matters into the territory of insidious half truths.

The two chief purveyors of half truths on the imperialist side, singled out by Chinua Achebe are Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* and Joyce Cary in *Mister Johnson*. The impulse behind this act of defiance is clear and Achebe is quite explicit on this point. In "The Role of Writer in a New Nation"² he says in no uncertain terms :

The question is how does a writer recreate this past? Quite clearly there is a strong temptation to idealize it - to extol its good points and pretend that the bad never existed

This is where the writer's dignity comes in. Will he be strong enough to overcome the temptation to select only those facts which flatter him? If he succumbs he will have branded himself as an untrustworthy witness. But it is not only his personal integrity as an artist which is involved. The credibility of the world he is attempting to recreate will be called to question and he will defeat his own purpose if he is suspected of glossing over inconvenient facts. We cannot pretend that our past was one long technicolor

² G.D. Killam ed. *African Writers on African Writing*, London : Heinemann, 1973, pp. 7-13.

idyll. We have to admit that like other people's
pasts ours had its good as well as its bad sides.

About Joyce Cary Achebe is succinct and categorical. In his essay "Africa and Her Writers"³ while discussing Armah's 'scornful, cold and remote ... obsession with the filth of Ghana' Achebe notes, "you have to go to the early European writers on Africa to find something of the same attitude and icy distance."⁴ This is followed by a paragraph long quote from Cary's description of Fada in *Mister Johnson*. More significantly, in an interview with Lewis Nkosi⁵, Achebe remarks :

Joyce Cary's novel set in Nigeria was praised so
much ... and it was clear to me that this was a
most superficial picture So I thought someone
ought to try and look at it from the inside.

Although Cary's treatment of Nigeria is seen as sympathetic, he nevertheless relies on the familiar analytic categories of colonial discourse whereby the Nigerians are characterized as "savages", "barbarians" and "bush pagans" unaffected by the battles of civilization. Thus Achebe's attempt to counter Cary's fictive representations underline not only the fact that he successfully cuts through their liberal facade but also that Cary's apparently sympathetic representations of Nigerians are insidious and more dangerous because they might

³ Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet On Creation Day*, London : Heinemann Educational Books, 1975.

⁴ Ibid., p. 26.

⁵ Lewis Nkosi, "Some Conversations with African Writers", *African Report*, Vol. XI, No. 9, Dec. 1966, pp. 7-11.

preempt a serious critique of Cary's reliance on colonial superstructures of thought.

Against Conrad, Achebe is far more detailed and polemical. In "An Image of Africa"⁶ Achebe calls Conrad "a bloody racist" who "chose the role of purveyor of comfortable myths". Achebe holds that the Conradian world is one built on Manichean dualism :

Heart of Darkness projects the image of Africa as the other world, the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality.⁷

Conrad, according to Achebe, was also giving vent to one popular conceit, that Europe's devastation of Africa left no mark on the victim.

Achebe gives an instance from *Heart of Darkness* :

It is the scene where a French gunboat is sitting on the water and firing rockets into the mainland. Conrad's intention, high minded as usual, is to show the futility of Europe's action in Africa. 'Pop would go one of the six inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a tiny projectile would give a feeble scratch – and nothing happened. Nothing

⁶ Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa". *Massachusetts Review*, 18 (1977), pp. 782-94.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 789.

could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding.'

About sanity I cannot speak. But futility, good heavens, no! By that crazy act of shelling the bush France managed to acquire an Empire in West and Equitorial Africa ten times its own size.⁸

This is the novelist as teacher. However, all five of Achebe's novels are open ended and the ideologue never intrudes to destabilise the autonomy of art. To separate the two roles so perfectly was Achebe's supreme triumph and his novels bear immediate testimony.

Things Fall Apart

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*⁹ was published in 1957, and forty year later it is still the most widely read African novel and an indispensable reference point in context of African literature. The reason is not far to seek for as Eustace Palmer has remarked "*Things Fall Apart* demonstrates a mastery of plot and structure, strength of characterization, competence in the manipulation of language and consistency and depth of thematic exploration which is rarely found in a first novel."¹⁰

⁸ Chinua Achebe, "African Literature as Restoration of Celebration" in *Kunapipi*, Vol. XII, No. 2, 1990.

⁹ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, London : Heinemann, 1958.

¹⁰ Eustace Palmer, *The Growth of the African Novel*, London, Heinemann, 1958, p. 128.

We begin our analysis of this novel with the general observation that in *Things Fall Apart* there are two distinct narrative voices and they can be divided into two broad categories of traditional - communal and modern - individual. The first of these, predominant in the two thirds of the novel is the communal voice of one or a number of sympathetic elders who provide eye witness accounts of Iboland in the 1890s through a mixture of anecdotes, gossip, folk-tales and proverbs, in which the emphasis is on experience that is shared rather than as it appears to any individual consciousness.

The second voice, which intrudes increasingly in the last third of the novel is the urbane editorial voice of a modern Nigerian of the 1950s who sees beyond the viewpoint of the villagers who are now 'they' rather than 'we' and who present the decay of traditionalism :

There were many men and women in Umuofia who did not feel as strongly as Okonkwo about the new dispensation. The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion but he had also built a trading store and for the first time palm oil and kernel became things of great price and much money flowed into Umuofia.¹¹

The two voices as Neil McEwan¹² has observed are equally weighted with an adroit and complex neutrality. Achebe, as the son of a

¹¹ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, London: Heinemann, p. 21.

¹² Neil McEwan, *Africa and the Novel*, Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1983, pp. 22-25.

missionary teacher whose own father welcomed the missionaries into Ogidi (Achebe's birthplace) cannot completely identify with the values of his tribal past, these are only half of his inheritance. As Gareth Griffiths¹³ puts it 'the modern African intellectual is the descendant of the tribal underdog ... Achebe is the inheritor of Nwoye's revolt as well as Okonkwo's sacrifice.

Having established this we come to the most fundamental issue: what causes things finally to fall apart in Umuofia? It is now a critical common-place that the coming of the white man's missionary Christianity is only an indirect influence, as much a symptom as a cause.

The Yeatsian title and epigraph are important here. Yeats's vision of history as a succession of alternating civilizations, each giving way to the other through its inability to contain all human impulses within one enclosed system of values and being replaced by all that it overlooked or undervalued, all that its own heritage had incapacitated it from understanding, is never very far from Achebe's novel.

It is a standard feature of Yeats's system that things collapse from within before they are overwhelmed from without and that one process is continuous with the other. It is thus that the novel "does not

¹³ Gareth Griffiths, 'Language and Action in the Novels of Chinua Achebe', in *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, ed. C.L. Innes & Bernth Lindfors. London: Heinemann, 1979, p. 70.

portray the sudden opposition of separate, self contained and mutually exclusive forces."¹⁴

Christianity makes its incursions into Igbo culture not by a free frontal assault but by responding to an already existing need which the indigenous civilization has made no allowance for and it is constituted out of what the latter has discarded. "Civilizations by creating their own misfits and malcontents, select their own executioners and conspire with their own downfall."¹⁵

It is here that the Yeatsian pattern comes into play, for it is a hallmark of that pattern that the misfits and rejects of one civilization become ready converts for the conquering faith of another one. It is significant that the sect joined by Nwoye has established itself in the 'Evil Forest', the place where the Umuofians deposit everything they have no use for and therefore either abominate or devalue: tabooed slaves, albinos, twins, victims of the swelling sickness, the diseased and defective; and ironically Okonkwo himself, whose suicide like his father's shameful sickness denies him an honourable burial.

Umuofia has simply excluded too much in human experience and the cracks resulting from the strain of repression have been showing for some time. It is the very arbitrariness and inadequacy of Igbo schemes of justice – the shooting is an accident after all – which the novel lays

¹⁴ Derek Wright, "Things Standing Together: A Retrospect on *Things Fall Apart*", in *Kunapipi* Vol. XII, No. 2, 1990, p. 79.

¹⁵ Derek Wright, *Ibid.*, p. 80.

open to question, as instanced in Obierika's speculation that such a possibility can be recognized:

Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently? ... He remembered his wife's twin children whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed.¹⁶

The conflict of loyalties – personal and tribal, human and religious has long proved too much for Obierika who is compelled to comfort his friend and then burn his house; to father twins and then destroy them. The coexistence of these two orders of allegiance emblemized in the *egwugwu* who are simultaneously the villagers and their ancestral spirits, is becoming more difficult specially in the presence of men like Okonkwo who pursue the letter of the law unflinchingly for fear of being thought weak.

In the dilemma over Ikemefuna, Okonkwo spurns the easy option, the humane but casuistical compromise offered by Ezendu (offend neither the gods by hindering, nor one's own conscience by helping): a compromise by which the community tries to evade its own cruelties and which betrays its lack of courage in its own convictions. In his fanatical, ruthless rectitude and his heartlessly literal minded pursuit of the letter of the law Okonkwo can be seen as testing the limits of his society's integrity and exposing its real failure to provide for humane and compassionate feelings. The society on the other hand probes

Okonkwo's capacity for accommodating the anomalies and discrepancies; probes his resilience in face of incongruent pulls, judges on merit his title to leadership of the community and rejects his candidature. In that sense Okonkwo's exile has a deep symbolic meaning.

The novel offers no support for the view that Okonkwo is a symbolic embodiment or personification of Igbo values. On the contrary Okonkwo is out of step with the village values which he sees himself as upholding, a fact made clear early in the novel by his impatience with enforced idleness during the 'New Yam Feast' and his disturbance of the 'Week of Peace'. Okonkwo's imperious aggressive individualism is out of harmony with a society that is renowned for its talent for social compromise. His cult of virility by mistaking the nature of courage and confusing gentleness with weakness upsets the equilibrium that maintains a delicate balance between male values and maternal ones.

Where the community is flexible and open minded, he is steady and fixed in purpose. Incapable of changing himself, he resists change in others and in the world at large, and returning from exile to find a radically altered society can only resort to the violence which is no more the code of his community at the end of the book than it was at the beginning. Far from embodying the communal ethos, Okonkwo repeatedly violates both it and the organic balance of human life, nature and the clan gods which it sustains.

As has been noted, "his recklessness and extremism lead him to transgress the traditions he is trying to embody, to distort the values he seeks to defend." Okonkwo is, in Gerald Moore's words, 'a sort of super-Igbo.'¹⁷

Critics of different ideological leanings have noted and underlined this paradox. Derek Wright feels that it is Achebe's triumph in the paradoxical setting of the novel's world which is also the world of Umuofia, Nwoye's 'failure' guarantees his survival whilst Okonkwo's success ensures his downfall.

The dominant paradox, as David Carroll¹⁸ argues is that Okonkwo's inflexible will brings him success in a society which is remarkable for its flexibility. Carroll makes an interesting comparison between Achebe's hero and Henchard in Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. "Both are wrongheaded, fiercely single-minded individuals who flout all the traditional values but who when the status quo is threatened by powerful alien forces spring to its defence and champion communities of which they are untypical only to find that the community has already capitulated and that they stand alone. "Okonkwo sacrifices himself to an exaggerated, almost pathological sense of duty to a community that is embarrassed by his fanaticism."

Concerning Obierika the character and his author, Chinua Achebe the following excerpt from a long interview is an appropriate

¹⁷ Gerald Moore, *Twelve African Writers*, London: Hutchinson, 1980, p. 127.

¹⁸ David Carroll, *Chinua Achebe*, rev. ed., London: Macmillan, 1980, pp. 40, 59.

frame for our reflection on Achebe's real intentions behind the writing of

Things Fall Apart :

Jeyifo: If I may ask a question which I have always wanted to ask you but which is I know it is always a little too bold to see a writer in terms of his fictional characters However, I have always wanted to ask if there is something of Achebe in Obierika in *Things Fall Apart*?

Achebe : Yes, that is very bold indeed!

Well, the answer is yes, in the sense that at the crucial moment when things are happening, he represents this other alternative. This is a society in *Things Fall Apart* that believes in strength and manliness and the masculine ideals. Okonkwo accepts them in a rather literal sense ... and the culture 'betrays' him. He is betrayed because he is doing exactly what the culture preaches. But you see, the culture is devious and flexible, because if it wasn't it wouldn't survive. The culture says you must be strong, you must be this and that, but when the moment comes for absolute strength the culture says, no, hold it! The culture has to be ambivalent Obierika is therefore more subtle and more in tune with the danger, the impending

betrayal by the culture and he is not likely to be crushed because he holds something in reserve.¹⁹

Elsewhere, commenting on this and on the comparative significance of Okonkwo and Obierika, Jeyifo says :

The problem with most critical commentaries on *Things Fall Apart* is to have almost completely missed out on the demythologizing of identity and culture within the precolonial social order while fastening one-sidedly on the novel's ironic deflations of the binarisms and polarities of the encounter of the colonizer and the colonized. The characters can be seen as fundamentally discrepant cultural avatars: Okonkwo as the cultural hero who is doomed because of his rigid, superficial understanding – really misrecognition of his culture – Obierika as a sceptical, dissenting and prescient observer of the culture's encounter with the self and the colonizing other.²⁰

Obierika provides a nexus of significations which offers us a perception of culture as a necessary but expendable medium through which identity is negotiated between the self and others. He is deeply humane

¹⁹ 'Literature and Conscientization: An Interview with Chinua Achebe' in Biodun Jeyifo, ed., *Contemporary Nigerian Literature*, Lagos: Nigeria Magazine 1988, pp. 12-13.

²⁰ Biodun Jeyifo, 'For Chinua Achebe: The Resilience and the Predicament of Obierika in *Kunapipi*, Vol. XII, No. 2, 1990.

and sensitive and is imbued with a sagacious moral imagination. Thus it is Obierika who registers the falling apart of things; it is he who records the collapse of the most vital identity forming connections of the culture: kinship, community, ritual and ceremonial institutions.

But Obierika's melancholy bears a janusface: he registers the myths and distortions of the colonizer about the natives which justify the violent usurpation that is the regime of colonialism; at the same time his discomfited gaze had taken in the negating destructive myths and hypostatizations in the central, identity giving institutions and practices of his culture. It is important to recognize that Obierika's scepticism towards his culture achieves its tremendous value precisely because he bears deep, positive currents of 'value predispositions' and identity from the very same culture.

Among many of the ironic twists of *Things Fall Apart* is the fact that while the main narrative line about Okonkwo leads to tragedy and a general sense of social malaise, the fragmentary, supporting stories and, motifs of the 'agbale' and the 'efulefu' move in the direction of restitution at the end of the novel.

Almost all the first converts to the new religion, the first minor functionaries of the colonial administration, are drawn from this subaltern group. For this group things certainly did not fall apart! Achebe's ironic vision extends to their liberation by colonialism. It is important to recognize Achebe's depiction of the process of 'othering'

within the pre-colonial social order, a process which creates a vast body of marginalised 'others' made up mainly of the osu (slaves), social outcasts and significantly, women. As Blodun Jeyifo has remarked in this context :

There is thus at work in *Things Fall Apart* a dialectic, on the one hand, of cultural affirmation and on the other hand cultural critique and deflation. One pole, the pole of affirmation may be said to coalesce around doxa: belief, opinion or custom perceived in terms of elementary structures of ordered meanings and cohering values. *Things Fall Apart* may be regarded in this respect as a vast doxological compendium of Igbo culture before the advent of colonialism. At the opposite pole from doxa we have the pole of para-dox (a), or irony and dialectic. This is the pole of cultural demystification of which *Things Fall Apart*, like Achebe's third novel, *Arrow of God* is also an exemplary textual articulation.²¹

Now, this is the critical perspective which sees *Things Fall Apart* as a classic study in character, emphasizing, as it does, Okonkwo's inflexibility, his stubborn individualism, his resistance to change and his role as a clog in the wheel.

²¹ Blodun Jeyifo, *Ibid.*, p. 61.

Now, the question which most naturally puts itself here is about this perspective or paradigm being given such prominence in a study which ostensibly claims to be a study of the colonial consciousness. And that precisely is the point. For at least in the case of Achebe no study of the colonial consciousness can be possible unless we take into account Achebe's heroes in their full behavioral vicissitudes. In using the same kind of person (with variation in the situational matrix of course) as protagonist in his novels, one after the other (with the exception of *Anthills of the Savannah*) Achebe could not have been working without a pattern or scheme.

Since the case put forward by critics on the other side of the great divide hinges so overwhelmingly on Okonkwo's fate, to consider and dispute the determinants of Okonkwo's fate is to question a particular critical perspective.

This other perspective holds that written and published when most of Africa was still under colonial rule, the political intentions of the novel must be appreciated. It further holds that an undue concentration on the character analysis of Okonkwo, indomitable as he may be as a hero ignores the systematic emasculation of a culture. It holds that the intense virulence of Achebe's indictment of colonial diplomatic tactlessness and absurd human high handedness cannot be lost to the perceptive reader. For the adherents of this perspective *Things Fall Apart* is indeed a classic study of cross cultural misunderstanding and its consequences to the rest of humanity when a belligerent culture or

civilization out of sheer arrogance and ethnocentrism takes it upon itself to invade another culture.

However, as my study has tried to demonstrate (and this is largely in tune with the modern shift in critical focus), to undermine the characterological ingredients while highlighting the situational pressure is not in tune with Achebe the novelist's intentions. Thus we see that in *Things Fall Apart* the impact of colonialism on the African society is not portrayed in terms of simplistic oppositional matrix. Within the traditional society there are at least three highly differentiated poles of consciousness registering the encounter, each in its own way. With the benefit of hindsight we may apply Ikem's comments in *Anthills of the Savannah* to the case in hand: "The most obvious practical difficulty is the magnitude and heterogeneity of the problem. There is no universal conglomerate of the oppressed; the oppressed inhabit each their own peculiar hell."²²

However, so far as *Things Fall Apart* is concerned the three poles of consciousness are, Okonkwo, the protagonist, the traditional society, and the rejects of this society. The last of these consisting of the outcasts has nothing to lose and the impact of colonialism as far as this group is concerned is expressly emancipatory. What we tend to ignore is that this section constitutes about one third of the native population, as their number has increased over generations.

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²² Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*, Picador, p. 107.



Then we have Okonkwo, the hero of *Things Fall Apart* who registers the impact as a negation of his free existence and values. No doubt Okonkwo's gesture, first in wielding the machet against the alien order and then in choosing for himself the noose rather than humiliation at the hands of the white man does have a heroic quality, and is to that extent also tragic. The tragic consequences of colonialism as it unfolds in the drama of Okonkwo's end is admirably demonstrated by Madhusudan Prasad²³ in his essay on *Things Fall Apart*, and on this issue Dr. Prasad is seconded by Franz Fanon who remarked:

As for us who have decided to break the back of colonialism, our historic mission is to sanction all revolts, all desperate actions, all those abortive attempts drowned in rivers of blood.²⁴

The element of protest in Okonkwo's act is too pronounced to be ignored and in mankind's struggle against all kinds of homogenising visions and hegemonic and authoritarian superstructures, protest (however desperate) is too valuable a weapon to be surrendered. But in Okonkwo's case the sacrifice is not, in my view, regenerative and the protest is essentially banal. Banal, because although Okonkwo claims to the contrary, the protest is not lodged on behalf of the people. The text is unambiguous on this point and later in the novel even Okonkwo

²³ Madhusudan Prasad, 'Colonial Consciousness in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in Ramesh K. Srivastava ed. *Colonial Consciousness in Black American, African and Indian Fiction in English*. Jalandhar, ABS Publications, 1991, pp. 79-87.

²⁴ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, op. cit., p. 81.

is fully conscious of the non-participation of the crowd. A culture or a society cannot sanction – however urgent or pressing the demand – such kneejerk responses. Cultural encounters are not prone to such shotgun resolutions. To say this is not to belittle the individual sacrifice but to go beyond it to the dynamics of social life as it is portrayed in *Things Fall Apart*.

Achebe was not chronicling the tragedy of an individual, for then the novel would have ended a good hundred pages earlier. In the second part of the novel we have as far as Okonkwo is concerned, all the ingredients of the situation which we meet at the end of the novel. This is Okonkwo considering the consequences of Nwoye's conversion : A sudden fury rose within him and he felt a strong desire to take up his matchet, go to the church and wipe out the entire vile and miscreant gang. But on further thought he told himself that Nwoye was not worth fighting for ... Suppose when he died all his male children decided to follow Nwoye's steps and abandon their ancestors? Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation.²⁶

²⁶ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*,

The 'prospect' is turned into reality at the end.

But the point is, if Achebe was not writing the tragedy of an individual where is the justification for having such powerful protagonists and investing so heavily into the delineation of the hero's psychic conflicts. The justification lies, I feel, in Achebe's over-arching pattern. What Achebe is doing in his novels and specially with his heroes – Okonkwo, Obi, Ezeulu, Odili – is trying to zero in on the kind of person who can take the African society out of its present state of indirection and desolation. He recruits idealists, traditionalists and all manner of people to take on the mantle and all his heroes at some level of their being are at loggerheads with the masses; Obi calling them the 'Augean Stable' and Odili calling them 'The real culprits'.

Achebe tests their convictions and finds them pathetically wanting, at other times their conviction in its thoroughness lapsing into fanaticism.

It is here that the colonial factor intrudes most tellingly and Achebe's triumph lies in the fact that he probes the colonial influence precisely at those points where a lesser writer would not have suspected them.

It is the presence of colonialism, as an alternative, enticing and far from neutral world view which seals the divide between the obliging masses and the unyielding heroes. As Achebe shows, the very logic of colonialism is divisive. It drives a permanent wedge between those on

whose shoulders lies the responsibility of steering the people clear of this mess, and the masses. In post colonial societies this gap between the needs and aspirations of the people on the one hand and the insular initiative of the leaders is astoundingly unbridgeable.

This again is a colonial legacy. It was a matter of strategy for the white colonists to maintain a discreet distance from the natives they ruled. For their descendants, the native bourgeoisie it came as a handy and time tested legacy.

So far as the trilogy (*Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer At Ease* and *Arrow of God*) is concerned the tragedy inevitably arises out of the protagonists failure to connect with the masses. And this failure is the direct outcome of the colonial consciousness operating in two different ways; in the protagonist on the one hand and the people on the other. And this compounds and heightens the tragedy of the hero's ignominious end. Even though recognizing that the death of Okonkwo is brought about by the imperialist – "you drove him to kill himself" says Obierika - society won't allow a decent burial for him. This is the ultimate tragedy: such a well meaning sacrifice wasting itself on a people with a down to earth instinct for survival.

No Longer At Ease

In the second novel, the Igbo society has undergone definite changes and the conflicts here are those peculiar to a society in transition. The politics of the city is marked by a pervasive and corrosive corruption

which people condemn in the open but strive secretly to excel each other in practicing. Bribery is part of the way of life because it holds the key to easy wealth and quick social and political prominence.

The hero of the novel Obi, returns home after his education in England. He is appalled at the corruption and the distorted values of his society and idealistically vows to change things and purge his society of its anomalies and maladies. He himself succumbs at the end of the novel when he surrenders to the corruption in the system.

The perversity in the system can be seen in the people's attitude when Obi is facing a jail sentence for bribery. The Umuofia people in the novel do not necessarily blame him for accepting the bribe but they cynically criticize him for the smallness of the amount involved. They philosophize that if a man wants to eat a toad he 'should look for a fat and juicy one.'

The President said it was a shameful thing for a man
in the senior service to go to prison for twenty
pounds. He repeated twenty pounds, spitting it out.²⁶

They further rebuke his inexperience and indiscretion in doing 'what everyone does without finding out how it was done.'

He should not have accepted the money himself.
What others do is tell you to go and hand it to their
houseboy.²⁷

²⁶ Chinua Achebe, *No Longer At Ease*, London : Heinemann, 1960, p. 32.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

The people in the novel go to the city not for work but for money :

'It is money, not work' said the man. We left plenty of work at home ... Anyone who likes work can return home, take up his machet and go into that bad bush between Umuofia and Mbaino. It will keep him occupied to the last days. The meeting agreed that it was money, not work, that brought them to Lagos.²⁸

The emerging cities hold opportunities for jobs and better living standards for the younger generation who in turn respond with a mass emigration to the urban centres leaving behind the old men and women. The latter stay within the realities of their village while the youth are exposed to new ideas and a different style of life.

Yet the focus is on the hero - his nature, his shortcomings and his excesses. As Ernest Emenyonu puts it "the major conflicts in the novel centre on Obi's standards and the gulf between Western acculturation and Nigerian urban realism."²⁹

Obi, the hero of *No Longer At Ease* is the grandson of Okonkwo and the son of Nwoye (now christened Issac and a retired catechist). Obi stands for modernism in the novel but he is as stubborn as Okonkwo, his grandfather. Like him he is high spirited and too inflexible

²⁸ Ibid., p. 32.

²⁹ Ernest N. Emenyonu, *The Rise of the Igbo Novel*, Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 107.

to care for popular demands and interests. Like his grandfather Obi too appears committed dogmatically to his personal beliefs to the point of irrationality and this is suggested as the reason for his downfall. His over zealousness as a young man almost results in a sacrilege to his village. Neither Obi, nor Okonkwo is the epitome of people's customs and traditions and when tragedy strikes at the end neither has the will of the people behind him. Instead as Ernest Emenyonu has pointed out, 'there is a sense of unity among the people once the protagonist is not in their midst.'³⁰

The Umuofia society did not want to be left behind so they taxed themselves to raise money to educate one of their sons to the university level. Obi is their 'only palm fruit' in the Nigerian Civil Service. They look up to him for leadership but his concept of duty and service is diametrically opposed to that of his people.

In the incident with the lorry driver who had wanted to bribe a policeman (and later does) the exchange between Obi and the lorry driver is emblematic of the gap between the contending moral perspectives :

'Why you look the man for face when we want to give un two shillings? 'he asked Obi. Because he has no right to take two shillings from you.' Obi answered. 'Why you put your nose for matter way no concern you?'³¹

³⁰ Ibid., p. 125.

³¹ Chinua Achebe, *No Longer At Ease*, p. 43.

It produces in Obi an immediate indictment of the masses in his society:

'What an Augean stable!' he muttered to himself.

'Where does one begin? With the masses?

Educate the masses! He shook his head, Not a chance there.'³²

How out of character with the realities of his environment are the ideas of Obi is made clear by another exchange between Obi and Christopher about purging the Nigerian civil service of bribery and corruption. Obi charges that the civil service is corrupt because of the so called experienced men at the top. And when Christopher crosses him 'You don't believe in experience? You think a chap straight from university should be made a permanent secretary?' Obi lamely protests: 'I didn't say straight from the university but even that would be better than filling our top posts with old men who have no intellectual foundations to support their experience.'³³

The only way Obi sees of effecting the desired changes, determined as he is to rid the country of all shades of moral depravity is by wilfully imposing his ideas on the masses: 'A handful of men at the top. Or even one man with a vision – an enlightened dictator. He underestimates the problems of his society and therefore oversimplifies their solutions.

³² Ibid., p. 43.

³³ Ibid., p. 20

After successfully beating off the first man (whose approach is untypical of the system) who tries to bribe him on his new job, Obi pats himself on the back with :

Everyone said it was impossible to win. They said a man expects you to accept 'Kola' from him for services rendered and until you do, his mind is never at rest Had not a Minister of State said, albeit in an unguarded alcoholic moment, that the trouble was not in receiving bribes but in failing to do the thing for which the bribe was given? ... Stuff and nonsense! It was easy to keep one's hands clear. It requires no more than the ability to say: 'I'm, Mr. So and so, but I cannot continue this discussion. Good Morning.'³⁴

But we know better at the end of the novel. Obi is blinded by his delusions. Full of insecurities and without much self confidence, the moral capacities and great insight which he attributes to himself are marks of lack of self knowledge.

On the voyage home Obi begins an affair with Clara Okeke, a beautiful Igbo nurse, intelligent and sophisticated but an outcast, an Osu. Obi knows that he cannot marry an Osu, not even with the spirit of anti-Igbo tradition which his father a Christian fanatic brought him up,

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 87-88.

but with characteristic tendency to rationalize every situation in life he believes he can set aside the age long custom and stubbornly asserts that :

It was scandalous that in the middle of the twentieth century a man could be barred from marrying a girl simply because her great-great-great-great grandfather had been dedicated to serve a god thereby setting himself apart and turning his descendants into a forbidden caste to the end of time. Quite unbelievable ... not even my mother can stop me.³⁶

What Obi does not realise until too late is that an overseas education is irrelevant to the principles of tribal law. To be fair Obi's intentions cannot be questioned or faulted. But the trouble lies elsewhere. His ideas, pious and sometimes pompous as they are, stop short – far short – of becoming tangible convictions; perhaps the only source of fructuous human action. There is no evidence in Obi's actions that the principles he proclaims are based on any solid personal convictions. He is simply a romantic who fabricates inordinate programmes without any practical means to implement them. An excessive reliance on the hypothetical mode of reasoning – 'what would happen if ...' is the governing attribute of Obi's character. Achebe is too explicit about it for the point to be lost on us.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 72.

When Obi's father informs him of an impending Thanksgiving Church Service to mark his safe return from England he lapses into reverie with :

What would happen if I stood up and said to him, 'Father I no longer believe in your God?' He knew it was impossible for him to do it but he just wondered what would happen if he did. He often wondered like that.³⁶

As Ernest Emenyonu has pointed out :

Obi is an imposter who doubly reinforces his camouflage with acts of exhibitionism and bravado. His people help to make his tragedy inevitable because they fail to see the clown in him; but always see Obi as their only palm fruit which should not be allowed to get lost in the fire. All were deluded about Obi and none had enough sense to realize that they were fighting for a never-do-well and would have nothing to show for their fight 'except a head covered in earth and grime Obi is, rather, a man who assiduously strives to take the mole out of his neighbour's eyes while he is blinded all the time by the beam in his own eye.'³⁷

³⁶ Ibid., p. 56.

³⁷ Ernest Emenyonu, *The Rise of the Igbo Novel*, Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 129.

n similar vein Eustace Palmer dismisses Obi Okonkwo as a pale reflection of his grandfather. According to Palmer :

Obi lacks independence of spirit and the solid core which would have enabled him to resist temptation when his financial troubles began; he lacks initiative, merely allowing events to overtake him; and he is destroyed because he betrays his principles with astonishing ease, not as in the case of his grandfather because he champions them to the last.³⁶

And with both Okonkwo and Obi behind us we can safely take on Achebe's third novel *Arrow of God*, and Ezeulu, its hero.

Arrow of God

Perhaps Achebe's most successful effort at characterization is Ezeulu, the hero of *Arrow of God*. Ezeulu is the custodian of his village traditions and old ways, but he believes it is no use trying to resist the white man. He sees change as inevitable. So, while he remains a devoted Chief Priest of Umuaro at the same time he sends his son Oduche to join the Christian Church. Ezeulu as Chief Priest of Umuaro embodies religious as well as secular elements of Umuaro life.

³⁶ Eustace Palmer, *The Growth of the African Novel*, London, Heinemann Educational Books, 1979, p. 36.

Now, Ulu is the newest god in the six villages that make up the Umuaro clan. The Chief Priest of Ulu was created to stem the rivalry of individual village priests. In a situation in which six villages made up a union and each had its own god, it was not easy to establish the highest God without raking inter village tension which might destroy the union as a whole.

The Umuaro clan discreetly manouvers the situation by setting up a new god, Ulu, and placing him automatically above all other gods. Hence Ezeulu's dilemma, for the Chief Priest of Ulu clearly should be subject to no other priest. But the circumstances of the institution of both Ulu and its priest are controversial, for Ulu's priest was chosen from the smallest of the six villages and Ezedemili, the priest of the god Idemili (the most likely supreme diety of Umuaro in the absence of Ulu) has a grudge against the new hierarchy. He holds Ezeulu in great contempt and emphatically asserts that his own god has supremacy over Ulu.

The showdown comes as the climax of the novel and is ironically brought about by a series of events beyond Ezeulu's control. Ezeulu is pronounced and adjudged by the British administrator as the most upright man in the clan, following a land dispute between Umuaro and Okperi in which he gave testimony against his Umuaro people, believing that as Chief Priest of Ulu he cannot tell a lie just to save his people from the consequences of rash conduct. The British administration is anxious to establish indirect rule in Umuaro clan and

Captain Winterbottom, the arbitrator in the land dispute naturally decides to appoint Ezeulu as Warrant Chief.

The British administrator sees the appointment as a favour believing that it is a worthy reward for Ezeulu's honesty. The people of Umuaro, however, conclude that Ezeulu wants favour from the white man and that he is anxious for a friendly relation with the British. What neither the Europeans nor the Umuaro people understand is Ezeulu's high sense of responsibility and unreserved devotion to his god. He had testified against Umuaro strictly from the view point of duty. He expected no rewards because the occasion called for none. The white administrator's invitation is rebuffed by Ezeulu: 'Tell your white man that Ezeulu does not leave his hut. If he wants to see me he must come here'.

His action here as always is taken from the point of view of his god. His duties are with Ulu and his resolve not to stray far from Umuaro is strictly in keeping with the letter of his religious faith. But when he meets his people to explain his attitude many of them refuse to take Ezeulu the traitor seriously and chide him :

Ezeulu has told us that the white ruler has asked him to go to Okperi. Now, it is not clear whether it is wrong for a man to ask his friend to visit him It seems ... that Ezeulu has shaken hands with a man of white body A man who brings ant-ridden

faggots into his hut should expect the visit of lizards.⁹⁹

This desertion meant as retaliation for Ezeulu's former humiliation of the clan is what forces the Chief Priest to resolve to fight the white administration alone if there has to be a fighting.

The white administration, by imprisoning Ezeulu for thirty-two days has brought about a complication in the most sacred duty of his office – the eating of thirty sacred Yams used in keeping the calender of the lunar year. One of the yams has to be eaten at the end of each month as the new moon appears, and when there is only one yam left then the Chief Priest signals the beginning of the harvesting season.

In no circumstance can the people harvest any of the crops unless the Chief Priest has proclaimed the season. Because he has been imprisoned for thirty two days Ezeulu has missed two moons.

A crisis awaits Umuaro: can Ezeulu set aside the rigid codes of law and announce the harvest at its due time or will he stick to the letter of the law and ruin Umuaro with starvation and famine.

Thus the 'supreme test' of the power of the Chief Priest of Ulu comes with little prompting from Ezeulu himself and as Eldred Jones has rightly noted about this entire episode, 'Achebe also remains sufficiently ambivalent to leave open the question as to whether

⁹⁹ Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God*, London : Heineman, 1964, p. 177.

Ezeulu's action was selfish and his end deserved or whether he had suffered another of those inexplicable disasters which made the Greeks portray Fate as blind.

The episode recalls the beginning of the novel when Ezeulu ponders :

If he should refuse to name the day there would be no festival, no planting and reaping. But could he refuse?⁴⁰

Now, when the clan elders and law makers of Umuaro tried to persuade him, not too surprisingly Ezeulu is not moved by this appeal :

Umuaro is now asking you to go and eat those remaining Yams today and name the day of the next harvest If Ulu says we have committed an abomination let it be on the heads of ten of us here. You will be free because we have set you to it ... we shall take the punishment.⁴¹

In refusing to comply with their request it seems that Ezeulu has acted beyond his powers by apparently spurning the representatives of the clan. It appears too that since he owed his election to the ten law makers of the clan, his response amounts to 'a contempt of court'.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 260.

The point that the law makers tried to impress on him was that as makers and custodians of the law, they could unmake, revoke or modify laws enacted by them. Ezeulu's rejection of the view is strictly based on principles. He argues that once a law has been handed down no one is above it, not even the law-makers or Kings themselves. The elders in this instance were guilty of the same offence as Captain Winterbottom when he offered the white man's chieftancy to Ezeulu : they were defying a god. Thus, though Ezeulu 'could not wish to make the smallest man in Umuaro suffer maintains nonetheless that what might seem like wilful non-cooperation 'is not my doing.'

You cannot say: do what is not done and we shall
take the blame. I am the Chief Priest of Ulu and
what I have told you is his will not mine.⁴⁹

He states his case so clearly to make it appear that he is only an 'arrow in the bow of his God.' However, it is equally true that Ezeulu has a score to settle with his people and would very much wish to see the show-down take place even if it is simply for the selfish purpose of testing his power and humiliating his detractors.

It is Ezeulu's unshakeable trust in his god that heightens his tragedy at the end of the novel and enhances the ironies of his personal life. Estranged from Umuaro elders and becoming 'almost overnight something of a public enemy in the eyes of all', Ezeulu is undeterred in his position, believing as always that he is doing the will of Ulu. This is

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 261.

why the sudden death of his handsome son and heir Obika at the height of Ezeulu's services to Ulu not only shatters Ezeulu as a father but comes to him as the greatest betrayal of a god he had served so faithfully in his role as Chief Priest. Thus he moans in disbelief –

Ulu, were you there when this happened to me?

Why, he asked himself again and again, why had

Ulu chosen to deal thus with him Had he not

divined the god's will and obeyed it? When was it

ever heard that a child was scalded by the piece of

Yam its own mother put into its palm?⁴³

Ezeulu's dilemma permeates his existence. He had believed that once he had served his god faithfully and represented his will accurately to the people he could enjoy immunity from the malice and vindictiveness of his enemies. By his estimation he had upto that point performed his duties to his God very well. Why then had the god not played his part? The author vividly portrays this state of Ezeulu's mind :

Think of a man who unlike lesser men always goes to battle without a shield because he knows that bullets and machet strokes will glance off his medicine boiled body; think of him discovering in the thick of battle that the power has suddenly, without warning, deserted him.⁴⁴

⁴³ Ibid., p. 286.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 285.

As Ernest Emenyonu opines :

Ezeulu is a familiar figure in literature, a priest who confuses his religious role with his secular being. Tempted from the start to test the limits of his powers, he is in the end broken by the test, a demented old man whose mind has mercifully shaken itself free from the knowledge of defeat.⁴⁵

However, the author is quite explicit and vocal about one thing :

Ezeulu's only fault was that he expected everyone – his wives, his kinsmen, his children, his friends and even his enemies – to think and act like himself. As one who dared to say no to him was an enemy. He forgot the saying of the elders that if a man sought for a companion who acted entirely like himself he would live in solitude.⁴⁶

And throughout the novel Ezeulu has the image of a solitary man confined to his cell.

A Man of the People

A Man of the People, Achebe's fourth novel, may be seen as part of the progressive development throughout his work of a single theme : the moral relations of an individual with his society. All his novels present an historic overview of the processes by which a colonized society,

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 142.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 164.

overwhelmed by British influence is forced to open itself to the outside world exposing simultaneously its moral base and self-regulatory power to probing and dilutary influences of an alien culture. Thus, the individual within the new society, educated to behave in ways which are beyond what traditional law envisions or his contemporary community is prepared to legislate upon must look within himself for moral purpose.

As Rosemary Colmer has rightly underlined :

In Achebe's two historical novels the society chooses to reject grand dreams propounded by ambitious individuals and opts instead for survival. The instinct to survive which led Umuaro to choose life and Christ over starvation and Ulu has produced in *A Man of the People* the self seeking spirit of Anata and Urua. Achebe may on the surface seem to have turned to a new kind of social commitment in his fourth novel but the novel is clearly linked in its central argument with the earlier ones. There was a place where the rain began to beat the people, here now, is where they must begin to dry themselves.⁴⁷

A Man of the People is a vivid political satire, exuberant in tone but scathing in intent. The genial, corrupt Chief Nanga, who lends the book

⁴⁷ Rosemary Colmer "Quis Custodiet Custodiet? The Development of Moral Values in *A Man of the People*" in *Kunapipi*, Vol. XII, No., 2, 1990.

its sardonic title is truly a man of the people; the flamboyant avatar of their failings and ambitions. In a highly sophisticated handling of the situation with a frequently changing point of view it is clear that Chief Nanga alone is not the butt of satire. Odili Samalu, the outraged narrator and the masses whom Odili calls 'The real culprits' equally share the blame. Achebe specially underlines the masses' attitude to corrupt politicians :

'Let them eat' was the people's opinion; after all when the white man used to do all the eating did we commit suicide? Of course not. And where is the all powerful white man today? He came, he ate and he went, But we are still around Besides if you survive, who knows? It may be your turn to eat tomorrow. Your son may bring home your share.⁴⁸

Despite the novel's unlocated setting (Nigerian characters in a vaguely East African geography), it clearly deals with a generalized version of the political situation in Nigeria at the time it was written (1965-66). The issues however are not directly political but moral. Corruption is a vital concern and issues specifically connected with politics like the question of popular representation in govt. are raised. To this extent the novel shows a more immediate social engagement than the earlier three. But again Achebe focuses on the moral dilemma of the protagonist; the way in which his ideals conflict with the community ethic, and the extent to

⁴⁸ Chinua Achebe, *A Man of the People*, p. 139.

which he is true to his own beliefs. From the first scene in the novel Odili is faced with the question of what are the proper standards to apply: 'I knew I ought to be angry with myself but I wasn't. I found myself wondering whether – perhaps – I had been applying to politics stringent standards that did not belong to it.'⁴⁹

Odili Samalu constantly vacillates between moral sentiment and underhand action, so that whatever audience sympathy he has is established by the narrative form and not by his firm stand for a moral philosophy. Chief Nanga's arrival at the Anata school – the opening scene of the novel – is also the beginning of Odili's real education in life. In a delightful comic reversal, one minute Odili is scowling icily at the display of enthusiasm by Nanga's constituents and the next he melts in the sunny rays of Nanga's recognition as Nanga greets him as a former pupil and revives an old nickname, 'Odili the great'. In that moment he learns what it is to be singled out by a man of the people for praise and attention :

I became a hero in the eyes of the crowd. I was dazed. Everything around me became suddenly unreal; the voices receded to a vague border zone.⁵⁰

Odili has faced his first trial and has failed it. The parallel scene a few months later, when Nanga plucks him out of the crowd gathered in the

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 139.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 10.

Anata court for an election rally, sarcastically calls him 'Odili the great', reviles him and has him beaten up, is clearly foreshadowed here.

On his visit to the capital, Bori, Odili's moral equivocations cannot conceal the fact that he willingly lays himself open to temptation. Not completely blind to the moral contradictions he observes from so close, he is dazzled and completely bowled by Nanga's life style. It is not surprising then that Odili's revolt against Nanga does not spring from political motives. He is inclined to enjoy being in temporary possession of seven gleaming, silent-action water closets, an enjoyment in no way lessened by reading the municipal regulations about bucket latrines or by his tour of the city slums with Jean. Here is a piece of Odili's mind :

I had to confess that if I were at that moment made a minister I would be most anxious to remain one for ever. And may be I should have thanked God that I wasn't. We ignore man's basic nature, if we say, as some critics do, that because a man like Nanga had risen overnight from poverty and insignificance to his present opulence he could without much trouble be persuaded to give it up again and return to his original state.⁸¹

Significantly what motivates Odili's split with Nanga has nothing to do with politics or corruption; it is Nanga's appropriation of Odili's girl friend Elsie. Although it has long been a joke among Odili's acquaintances

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 41-42.

that he is merely an assistant to Elsie's real boy friend Ralph, he is horrified when she deserts him as quickly as she had attached herself to him.

As he walks the street in a fury of resentment, Odili sees the slums and the 'night soil men' emptying the bucket latrines he had despised, but the sight means nothing to him. Uppermost in his mind is his sexual humiliation. Achebe emphasizes Odili's blindness to the social issues which ought to concern an idealistic young politician. Elsie has changed in his mind from the friendly generous girl he goes to see at the hospital into a common harlot and he spitefully determines to appropriate Nanga's bride-to-be, Edna.

Nanga's appropriation of Elsie is taken as a personal insult and Odili's overreaction is proportionate to his former enjoyment of Nanga's regard for him. Odili realizes that he has become not the minister's pal but the minister's pimp and he bitterly resents Nanga's changed attitude to him.

What is important to our thesis at this point is the proliferation of instances which overwhelmingly demonstrate that as long as Odili is the centre of public attraction or ovation or the object of enthusiastic recognition on the part of an individual, he is more than willing to condone or shield the follies and vices around him. He is cut to the quick only when he feels personally slighted or duped.

There is no dearth of corroborative evidence in support of my thesis. To take a few; Nanga finds a way into Odili's heart when he hails him like a long lost son before a large audience. On the other hand when Odili's recognition of the writer, Jali, is not reciprocated he immediately resolves to despise him: 'Jali "replied hello and took my hand but obviously he did not remember my name and didn't seem to care particularly. I was very much hurt by this and immediately formed a poor opinion of him and his silly airs." His remark that the talk at Jean's party was very good is immediately followed by the reason for this judgement: "My closeness to the minister gave everything I said heightened significance. And I don't know whether this happens to other people, but the knowledge that I am listened to attentively works in a sort of virtuous circle to improve the quality of what I say."⁵² Thus we see that Odili's fury and resentment at Nanga's role in Elsie's desertion is of a piece with his behaviour elsewhere in the novel. Each trial that Odili faces is interpreted by him as a challenge to his pride and all too often he fails to see that the tests are moral ones. Odili's moral laxity, his unwillingness to apply stringent standards to his own behaviour which he still applies elsewhere leads to his own implication in a world of violence. His trials and many errors have not brought him to any firm moral ground. He has acquired a vast cynicism, a limited experience and very little appreciation of the extent of his own ignorance.

⁵² Ibid., p. 55.

Odili begins the novel idealistically opposed to Nanga and contemptuous of the villagers. He ends the novel guilty of most of the same moral errors and even the same crimes as Nanga. He is guilty too of the same errors as the villagers, ignorance and cynicism.

This is where Achebe's overarching pattern comes into play. For on one hand we have Nanga, the man of the people in 'being' and on the other we have Odili, a man of the people in 'becoming'. The leader and the led keep changing places both in the political and moral kaleidoscope that is Nigeria of mid-sixties immediately before Irons's military coup of 1966. The novel amply demonstrates the dictum that you cannot legislate for human attitudes. The apathetic immorality of the electorate is reflected in the pathetic morality of the leaders: "Tell them that this man had used his position to enrich himself and they would ask you – as my father did – if you thought that a sensible man would spit out the juicy morsel that good fortune placed in his mouth."⁵³

The novel deals in the pathology of corruption, and while dealing with the different kinds makes it amply clear that the road to the ultimate fall is through successive approximations.

Anthills of the Savannah

In 1983 Achebe published a booklet outlining what he saw as *The Trouble with Nigeria*. Interviewed after the publication of *Anthill of the Savannah* Achebe made it clear that one of his intentions in the

⁵³ Ibid., p. 2.

novel had been to take up issues raised in *The Trouble with Nigeria* and to use his novels to propose solutions. Published in 1987, the novel, as Ben Okri remarks, is Achebe's 'most complex and his wisest book to date. Dealing with the cynical calculations and calcifications of Africa's latter-day power elite and the bankruptcy of sixties and seventies nepotistic politics. *Anthills of the Savannah* is in a sense a sequel to *A Man of the People* which explored themes of political corruption and military takeover on the eve of Biafra.

The first sentence of *The Trouble with Nigeria* states quite plainly: The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. And Achebe elaborates :

The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership. ... Every single day of continued neglect brings Nigeria ever closer to the brink of the abyss. To pull her back and turn her around is clearly beyond the contrivance of mediocre leadership. It calls for greatness ... Nigerians are what they are only because their leaders are not what they should be.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble With Nigeria*, London : Heinemann, 1983, p. 10.

In pursuit of this leadership thesis Achebe goes as far as asserting that "after two decades of bloodshed and military rule in one of the most corrupt, insensitive, inefficient places under the Sun, what his society (wholly undifferentiated) craves today is not a style of leadership which projects and celebrates the violence of power but the sobriety of peace."

Achebe concludes that :

If Nigeria is to avoid catastrophe of possibly greater dimensions than we have been through since Independence we must take a hard and unsentimental look at the crucial question of leadership and political power.⁶⁶

When this concern with leadership finds direct expression in *Anthills of the Savannah* we find reference to 'leaders who openly looted our treasury, whose effrontery soiled our national soul.' Ikem, the central consciousness (hero) of the novel comes to the conclusion that the prime failure of leadership in Kangan, the novel's fictionalized version of Nigeria, can be seen as :

the failure of our rulers to re-establish vital inner links with the poor and dispossessed of this country; with the bruised heart that throbs painfully at the core of the nations being.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 59.

⁶⁷ Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*, London : Heinemann, 1987, p. 188.

brotherhood, justice, and freedom are at best grand illusions ... Reform may be a dirty word then but it begins to look more and more like the most promising route to success in the real world.⁹⁹

Here, Achebe's view of the elite and its politics in the wider African context has become more uncompromising and unlike in the earlier novel the elite must revise its power base and its understanding of leadership, opening its doors to traditionally excluded groups in so doing. Achebe's tentative new vision in *Anthills of the Savannah* expresses at once mature disillusionment and heavily qualified fresh hope.

Of the 'little clique' that found itself in a leadership position at independence, Achebe has noted that it 'was not big enough ... that it had no perception of incorporating others. In *Anthills* Achebe's mantra is incorporation – that is a type of Gramscian 'top-down' or 'passive revolution' one that operates through the appropriation of popular elements by an elite. He has tried to shift authority out and away from the group that inherited state power in the sixties, those first interpreters of African nationalism, and in so doing has called into question certain corrosive political conceptions that subtended the ruling ethos – the assumption of exclusiveness for example, and its unambiguous maleness. Though Achebe believes that the advent of a new leader should be followed by a radical programme of social and

⁹⁹ Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*, p. 99.

economic reorganization or at least a well-conceived, consistent agenda of reform; he sees the first step in any process of change as being new rulership; in effect, the intervention of personality.

Yet there are a host of contradictions involved in the articulation of the theory of leadership. Let us take for instance, Ikem's message to the students' assembly. Ikem's concluding injunction towards which the whole speech leads, is itself contradictory, given Achebe's apparent ascription of all responsibility for social ills to 'leaders'. Ikem tells the students :

I have no desire to belittle your role in putting this nation finally on the road to self-redemption. But you cannot do that unless you first set about to purge yourselves, to clean up your act. You must learn for a start to hold your own student leaders to responsible performance. Only after you have done that can you have the moral authority to lecture the national leadership.⁶⁹

This confuses matters considerably. If so heavy a weight of responsibility lies with the leaders it cannot at the same time lie with the led. The whole leadership thesis obviously falls down if it is the responsibility of those who are led, to 'hold ... (their) leaders to responsible performance.' The novel's concluding message, as detailed in an interview by Achebe, seems equally problematic :

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 160.

I think this group around Beatrice has learnt a lot in the course of the story. They have learnt, for instance, that the little clique that saw themselves as leaders was not big enough, that it had no perception of incorporating others. You have to incorporate the taxi drivers, the market women, the peasants, the workers, the students. You have to broaden out so that when you are talking, you are talking for the people, you are not only talking for a section or a group interest.⁹⁰

Now, as is evident from this what is needed is not a little clique of leaders but a larger group. This group must broaden out to enable it to talk 'for the people' who, crucially are still presumed to be unable to talk for themselves. But as you broaden out how do you retain your concept of leadership? If, as Achebe maintains, the role of leadership is to 'create the circumstances in which the people begin to act with awareness', do the incorporated taxi drivers, market women and peasants then represent the 'people', beginning to act with awareness?

It would seem from the distinction Achebe elsewhere draws between the 'elite' and the 'people', that leadership is probably the preserve of the elite :

The elite are important because they have been given special training and education and their duty

⁹⁰ Anna Rutherford, 'Interview with Achebe', *Kunapipi*, IX, 2, 1987, p. 3.

is to use it to initiate the upward movement of the people.⁶¹

Where *Anthills of the Savannah* is concerned the obvious question to ask is why Achebe should choose as the central scene representative of the essence of 'the people', the public execution on the beach. The answer would lie in the fact that it provides the most obvious occasion for demonstrating the need for leadership. The centrality given to the 'delirious and obscenely happy' crowd at the execution scene is the product of ideologically determined selection on the part of the author. It is clearly directed towards proving the necessity for leadership of the inherently brutish masses by an elite.

The fact that the people are prone to this kind of behaviour, that they could come to a stage where they could relish this kind of scene must make the leadership say to itself, 'why is this possible? How can this happen? It is wrong. We must do something about it.' So you find a leader like the editor of the National Gazette setting himself up to correct the situation.⁶²

For one thing, in *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe's analysis of the African society is presented from the point of view of one class - the political and intellectual elite; the intelligentsia. The two major classes

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 5.

⁶² Anna Rutherford, 'Interview with Achebe', *Kunapipi*, IX, 2, 1987, p. 2.

of the oppressed and deprived people, the peasants and the workers are given a place in the world of *Anthills*, but the roles are essentially minor.

The peasantry is represented by the delegation from Abazon and by Elewa's mother and uncle who visit Bassa for the naming ceremony. The working class is represented by the drivers. These are minor characters and Achebe does not give us sufficient insight into their lives, and responses to the events and problems that plague the Republic of Kangan. This precisely has been the complaint of Marxist critics about Achebe's choice of material and emphasis. But this is like telling Achebe to write a novel he did not set out to write. In fact one of the purposes that Achebe had in mind in *Anthills of the Savannah* was to underplay and to an extent subvert the Marxist orthodoxy. Ikem Osodi, who undoubtedly is Achebe's mouthpiece in *Anthills*, in his discussions with Beatrice formulates a radical theory of social class.

The women ... are the biggest single group of oppressed people in the world says Ikem, ... but they are not the only such group. There are others - rural peasants in every land, the urban poor in industrialized countries, Black people everywhere and ethnic and religious minorities and castes in all countries.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Chinua Ichebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*,

Using Ikem as a mouthpiece, Achebe questions some of the fundamental tenets of historical Marxism, including the idea of a millenium in which there is no oppression of one social group by another after the establishment of communism. Achebe's Ikem believes that the orthodox Marxist position proposes a simplistic remedy to the problem of oppression. For his part he does not believe that once a socialist and communist revolution has taken place, all the social problems of society are bound to disappear :

The sweeping majestic vision of people rising victorious like a tidal wave against their oppressors and transforming their world with theories and slogans into a new heaven and a new earth of brotherhood, justice and freedom are at best grand illusions. The rising, conquering tide, yes, but the millenium afterwards, no! New oppressors will have been readying themselves secretly in the undertow long before the tidal wave got really going.⁶⁴

This, then is the present shape of the post-colonial consciousness or Neo-colonial consciousness. In this connection it is pertinent to note that if there is any Nigerian politician Achebe holds in high esteem, it is the late Mallam Aminu Kano. And why does he extol Aminu Kano? The answer is given in *The Trouble with Nigeria* : Aminu Kano gave the example of a selfless commitment to the common people of our land

⁶⁴ Chinua Achebe. *Anthills of the Savannah* p. 98.

whom we daily deprive and dispossess and whose plight we treat so frivolously and callously.

The plot of *Anthills of the Savannah* hinges on the willingness of His Excellency, the President of the country (Kangan) to visit Abazon, the distant north-western region which has been in the grip of a severe draught for the last two years and where the people have been going through great suffering. This willingness is the litmus test of the sensitivity of the elite to the problems of the people; of whether the rulers are willing to identify themselves with the people or like their former colonial masters they are more obsessed with questions of their own dignity and status as shown in their determination to keep their distance from the rabble. They choose the latter course. However, the present President is also annoyed with the Abazonians because they did not support him in the referendum for life Presidency.

Apart from this Ikem Osodi looks at all the issues referred to above and others in relation to his function as a writer. His rejection of aspects of the orthodoxy of historical Marxism is closely linked with his views on the relationship between art and belief. Referring to Graham Greene, a staunch Roman Catholic who does not idealize catholic priests in his novels Ikem adds :

Why then does he write so compulsively about bad, doubtful and doubting priests? ... Because a genuine artist no matter what he says he believes must feel in his blood the ultimate enmity between

art and orthodoxy. The writer must not seek to constrain his or her characters but must let them go ahead and say or do things which make the creator uncomfortable It simply dawned on me two mornings ago that a novelist must listen to his characters who after all are created to wear the shoe and point the writer where it pinches.⁶⁵

In his lecture to university students in chapter thirteen Ikem addresses the all important question of the function of the writer. Writers do not provide solutions to problems, he argues; writers do not give prescriptions, they give headaches. Writers are therefore gadflies that prick our consciences. The most important function of the writer is to induce people to reflect upon the condition of their lives, to raise their consciousness so that they can begin to ask why things are as they are:

No I cannot give you the answer you are clamouring for. Go home and think! I cannot decree your pet, text-book revolution. I want instead to excite general enlightenment by forcing all the people to examine the condition of their lives because, as the saying goes, the unexamined life is not worth living As a writer I aspire only to widen the scope of that self examination.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Chinua Ichebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*, pp. 96-100.

⁶⁶ Chinua Ichebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*, p. 158.

CHAPTER III

WOLE SOYINKA :

RELUCTANT REVOLUTIONARY

^{the}
TO THIRD WORLD REALIST
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WOLE SOYINKA

Reluctant Revolutionary to ^{the}Third World Realist

When Wole Soyinka delivered his lecture in 1967 at the Scandinavian African writer's conference held in Stockholm, most African countries had already become independent, some over a decade earlier, and the first military coups had taken place in Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and other places. The Congo (Zaire) had had a disastrous civil war and in Nigeria the civil war was just about beginning. African society was indeed going through a turbulent period of readjustment.

What Soyinka could not understand was how such a pitiful state of affairs could pass the African intellectual and novelist unnoticed. He was scandalized to see that while all this was happening around; the African writer forgetful of his historical responsibility was busy singing of the glorious African past. Works embodying uncritical adulation of distant African past found solace for the present chaos in the hoary past.

Soyinka was pointing out that the African writer had a duty to act as the conscience of his nation. He has a very important role to play in the task of discovering new values and he can do so only if he alerts his people to the debasement of standards in the community; to the prevalence of corruption, incompetence, nepotism, injustice, brutality,

poverty, social inequality, rampant materialism, hypocrisy and snobbery.

Achebe, as we have seen was from the very start of his career, skeptical of attempts by African writers, specially the Negritude people to construct an elaborate glorious past which would fittingly stand against all aspersions of barbarity and culture vacuum. So is the case with Soyinka.

The above mentioned lecture was published as an article in *Transition* in 1967 and was titled 'The Writer in the African state' : In this article Soyinka argued that the African writer had failed :

After the united opposition by the colonised to the external tyrant ... victory came, of sorts and the writer submitted his integrity to the monolithic stresses of the time With few exceptions the writer directed his energies to enshrining victory. The stage at which we find ourselves now is the stage of disillusionment and it is this which prompts an honest examination of what has been the failure of the African writer as a writer In the movement towards chaos in modern Africa the writer did not anticipate ... Isolated by his

very position in society he mistook his own temporary and personal cultural predicament for the predicament of his entire society He even tried to give society something that the society had never lost - its identity. He was in any case still blinded to the present by the resuscitated splendours of the past.

Where he is purged of the long deception and has begun to express new wisdoms, the gates of the preventive detention fortresses opened up and closed on him. Poets have lately taken to gun running or exile.¹

In 1965, Soyinka himself, armed with a gun seized the microphone of the radio station in the western region of Nigeria and announced that the recent general elections which had been won by Chief Akintola had been shamefully rigged. Soyinka was arrested and tried.

This was in 1965, and in that very year Soyinka's first novel *The Interpreters*² was published. The desperation of the act as would be expected, is clearly reflected in the novel and it is the most eloquent

¹ Wole Soyinka, 'The Writer in the African State', *Transition*, No. 31, June-July, 1967.

² Wole Soyinka, *The Interpreters*, London : Heinemann, 1965.

exposure of the decadence of modern African society. On its publication, the 'London Times' summarised the plot in this way : "*The Interpreters* is concerned with a group of young Nigerian intellectuals trying to make something of their lives and talents in a society where corruption and consequent cynicism, social climbing and conforming give them alternate cause for despair and laughter".

Laughter, ample laughter there is in *The Interpreters*, but despair dictates the mood of the novel as the laughter is choked with sarcasm and satire. Soyinka's remorseless wit rips through the pretensions of all sections of society, the vulgar and corrupt businessmen, illiterate politicians and incompetent journalists, mediocre civil servants and aimless intellectuals. The laughter and comicality suggest that things are still in the realm of the redeemable; that the actors however ignorant of and indifferent to the degrading consequences of their actions are yet not the vicious incarnations of evil.

The five chief interpreters of this society are – Egbo, the foreign service official, Bandele, the university lecturer, the engineer and sculptor Sekmi Sagoe the journalist and the teacher of art Kola.

Although the interpreters have their shortcomings they are distinguishable by their honesty, courage, moral idealism and concern for equity from the generality of the Nigerian public whose frivolities Soyinka so brilliantly exposes through their eyes. In fact what

distinguishes the interpreters from the masses, prima-facie, is their education – university education. But what comes through is that these intellectuals who should be guiding the young nation in its hour of crisis acquit themselves horribly and the veneer of education cannot for long hold its own against the tide of mediocrity and corruption. The aimlessness and superficiality of the lives of most of the interpreters is patent. Indeed the conduct of the intellectuals both in and out of the university is a major preoccupation of Soyinka's in this novel.

The satire is most scathing when directed against the highest seat of learning, the Ibadan University. The university ought to be a powerful agent of change but the attitude of the faculty members renders it hopelessly inadequate for the task. Soyinka strips off the veneer of respectability to reveal the malevolence, pettiness, vulgarity, affectation and hypocrisy that go underneath. The avidity with which the university community tries to ape English mannerisms is grotesque. At professor Oguazor's party one would expect academic discussions and national issues; instead we have sleaze, slander and social climbing, scandal and deceit, duplicity and malice.

The conversation centres around sexual adventurism and Soyinka captures the tone of gossip with remarkable accuracy :

"Dr. Ajilo denied that he took prostitutes home. Never further than his garage, he

swore, but Oguazor was just behind him and he was not amused ... who is Salubi going with these days? That boy is morally corrupt I tell you. He doesn't even keep off the students.³

No other member of this group seems more pathetic than the ridiculous Dr. Ayo Faseyi. A highly talented young man who is considered the best X-ray analyst on the entire continent Dr. Faseyi should not normally need any external trappings to boost his social acceptability. But so concerned is he with status that he behaves like a nonentity striving to get society to recognize him. We first meet The Faseyis as they prepare to enter an embassy reception and we are shocked to see that Faseyi inspects his wife thoroughly, presumably to make sure that there is nothing about her that will 'disgrace' him at such a gathering of the 'establishment'. He himself wears a bontie and when he is satisfied with Monica he kisses her 'formally on the forehead'. The scene continues :
'You might as well put on your gloves now,'
What gloves? I didn't bring any'.
Faseyi thought she was teasing and out of character though it was, Monica was certain that her husband was teasing;
'Come on now, put on the gloves'.
'You stop teasing, now. Who do you see wearing gloves in Nigeria?'

³ Ibid., p. 150.

Faseyi was no longer joking. He had snatched the hand-bag from her and found that there were no gloves inside. 'Do you mean you didn't bring them?

'Bring what, Ayo?'

'The gloves, of course, what else?'

'But I haven't any gloves. I gave the ones I had away soon after I came'.

'I am not talking about two years ago.

I mean the gloves you've bought for tonight'.

'But you didn't say anything about gloves'.

'Was it necessary to say anything? It was right there on the card. In black and white'. He took the card from his pocket, dragged it from the envelope and thrust it under her eyes.

'Read it, there it is. Read it'.

Monica read the last line on the card.

'But Ayo, it only says those who are to be presented. We are not, are we?'

Ayo held his head. 'We are to be presented'.

'You didn't tell me. How was I to know?'

'How were you to know? It took me two weeks to wangle that presentation, and now you ask me how were you to know. What would be the whole point of coming if we were not to be presented.'

'I am sorry', said Monica, 'It never occurred to me ...'

'Nothing ever occurs to you

'I am sorry'.

'Darling, if the Queen was attending a garden party would you go dressed without your gloves?'

Commenting on this passage Eustace Palmer observes:⁵

The Queen and garden parties are completely irrelevant and out of context in an African setting. But the criticism extends beyond Ayo Faseyi to include the upper stratum of Nigerian society which does condone this uncritical transplantation of English upper class values to African soil. So scandalized is Ayo Faseyi by his wife's indiscretions during the reception and Oguazor's party that he becomes almost hysterical and demonstrates an incredible immaturity degenerating into stupidity. Faseyi behaves in this slavish way because he thinks he can use the contact with the professor and his kind to make headway in Nigerian society :

⁴ Ibid., pp. 258-59.

⁵ Eustace Palmer, *The Growth of the African Novel*, London : Heinemann Educational Books, 1979, p. 259.

'Do you know a Minister was present? Yes and one or two other VIPs. Oguazor knows people, you know. I saw four corporation chairmen these and some Permanent Secretaries 'Look, let's face the facts. The university is just a stepping-stone. Politics, corporations - there is always something. Not to talk of these foreign firms, always looking for Nigerian Directors. I mean Kola, you are an artist, but I am sure it is all a means to an end, not so?'

The portrayal of Sir Derinola and Chief Winsala is central to the exposure of corruption in Nigerian society. Sir Derinola is one of the pillars of the establishment, a chairman of several companies and an eminent and respected judge whose conduct should normally be above suspicion. But the actual reality is quite different. Of the interpreters, Sagoe the journalist, is most important since it is largely through his eyes that we are made to see the antics of contemporary Nigerian society. We applaud his sympathy and consideration for the common masses when he joins the eleven mourners instead of Sir Derinola's funeral. We can also contrast his humanity with the brutality of the Lagos crowd during the pursuit of Noah, the thief.

His integrity and concern for truth and justice make him champion Sekoni's cause when the latter is so brutally treated by his employers, and he justifiably registers his disgust at the connivance of his own newspaper bosses with the proprietors of other newspaper to suppress the truth. But he lacks the courage to pursue matters to their logical conclusion and resign his job.

He is selfishly professional at his job for he sees all the participants, in the events he observes, primarily as actors in a sensational newspaper drama thus bypassing the real human suffering.

Sekoni, the engineer is free from the cynicism which is the ultimate bane of the three interpreters Sagoe, Egbo and Kola. If Sekoni is also the most vulnerable it is because of his basic honesty and courage and his determination not to compromise his principles, and sacrifice his insights in order to accommodate the reactionary elements in his society. The shabby treatment of Sekoni's grand dreams for his country and the insulting assignments he gets in his country, justifiably elicit Sekoni's wrath. When his ingenious power station is condemned through a combination of jealousy, stupidity, conservatism and corruption, Sekoni himself batters it to pieces and goes mad. As Palmer has pointed out:⁶

The Sekoni story poignantly demonstrates the destruction of brilliance and originality by a

⁶ Ibid., p. 251.

narrow minded and corrupt society. There is also the suggestion that through this destruction the vast potential of the country which someone of Sekoni's vision would have succeeded in harnessing remains untapped. The ruined powerstation is therefore symbolic on more than one level.

As I have suggested in the beginning, in *The Interpreters* Soyinka limns a society which can afford to lay the blame on the doorsteps of the whites. The society had very fresh memories of the whites but by the time *Season of Anomy* was published, the symptoms outlined in the previous novel had been diagnosed and confirmed and the mannerisms of the earlier novel had settled into sinister life denying habits.

Season of Anomy

Commenting on the difference in tone between *The Interpreters* and Soyinka's second novel *Season of Anomy*⁷, Eustace Palmer has some revealing observations to make:⁸

"Where he has contrived some hilarious scenes in the earlier work the mood of *Season of Anomy* is unmitigatedly grim. It was published some eight years after *The Interpreters* and a

⁷ Wole Soyinka, *Season of Anomy*, London : Rex Collings, 1973, p. 164.

⁸ Ibid., p. 267.

lot had happened during that period to affect Soyinka's outlook profoundly. There had been two military coups in Nigeria involving great blood shed and violence; a bitter civil war with ugly allegations of genocide, the death of a number of promising personalities like Okigbo in a strife, a military dictatorship with political parties abolished and normal democratic process suspended, and Soyinka's own imprisonment and eventual voluntary exile. The situation of the African continent had deteriorated to the point of bleak helplessness.

The African continent seemed, in fact, to be going back to the anarchic historical state powerfully described by Oulouguen in *Bound to Violence*. The immediate post independence phase of social and political corruption and intellectual dishonesty was now giving way to a bleaker phase of dictatorship, victimization, thuggery and violence organised at the highest level and a prevailing atmosphere of fear.

Ofeyi, the protagonist and his companion Iriyise are up against the Cartel (the ruling dispensation) and the novel details this struggle for power. The ruling Cartel is a dictatorial regime consisting of civilians backed by military might, the commandant-in-chief of the armed forces

being one of its arms. It is typical of the system of government of a good number of independent African states. Its realization that its power is not based on the will of the people makes the Cartel highly suspicious of anyone showing the slightest signs of deviating from its wishes. The number of people whom the Cartel bribes and corrupts into connivance is legion. The Cartel will stop at nothing to achieve its dastardly ends and the kind of life it offers the people is one of unmitigated misery, fear and degradation.

At the beginning of the novel we have presented to us the Aiyero society regarded by the rest of the country as an eccentric anomaly because of its quasi-communistic system which ensures to its citizens material prosperity, justice and equity and demonstrates concern for the welfare of every individual. Aiyero society is vibrantly life affirming. During his visit to Aiyero, Ofeyi discovers that Aiyero soil is fit for cocoa plantation and thinks of a clever plan to start a model cocoa plantation.

It is not too difficult to see the similarity between the cocoa drive and the Aiyero ideal. As Eustace Palmer opines:⁹

Both symbolize the good life. In fact, Aiyero represents a realization of the ideal good life which the cocoa plant is supposed to give to every Nigerian citizen. It is therefore, perfectly

⁹ Eustace Palmer, *The Growth of the African Novel*, London, Heinemann Educational Books, p. 274.

natural for Ofeyi to think of the idea of linking Aiyero with his cocoa promotion campaign. The cocoa plant, like Aiyero, is also associated with images of germination, fertility and growth. In this corrupt society, however, the people are deprived of the good life which the cocoa plant should give them as of right, because the greedy authorities have sought to appropriate it all for themselves. They sell to the people, not the genuine thing, but a severely adulterated form : cocoa-wix, cocoa-bix and cocoa-flavoured sawdust.

Ofeyi's cocoa promotion campaign linked with his crusade for a cleaner life is eminently successful because he himself is so resourceful, courageous, efficient and morally upright. He carries his campaign into another region, Cross-River and when his activities in Cross-River begin to have visible effect the Zaki gives orders for the most terrible reprisals, unleashing a war of genocide with the most inhuman consequences.

The Cartel as shown by Soyinka consists of four members: Chief Biga – the hatchet man of the Cartel; the commandant in Chief, Batoki, the brain of the Cartel and Zaki Amuri, the real power centre of the Cartel.

In its presentation of violence and horror this novel surpasses even Oulouguem's *Bound to Violence*. Soyinka is here expressing his detestation and horror at the cruelty and injustice that characterized the conduct of government in his country during both periods, before and during the Nigerian civil war. The worst atrocities in the novel are perpetrated in Cross-River itself where the Zaki has given orders for a campaign of genocide. The reader watches spell bound as helpless multitudes are massacred while the police army and other forces of law and order stand idly by. Soyinka stresses the dehumanization and brutalization as men become reduced to the level of animals in their hunt for others or in their attempt to escape. As Eustace Palmer has remarked:¹⁰

It is possible that in the creation of some of these scenes Soyinka has in mind the turbulent events immediately preceding the first Nigerian coup. But there are also suggestions here of the state of the country under military rule. Certainly the civilian rulers of the three regions - Zaki Amuri, Chief Biga and Chief Batoki - are meant in a vague way to recall the three regional premiers of the northern eastern and western regions of

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 282-83.

Nigeria before the coup. Zaki Amuri, like the emir is a traditional Muslim ruler and Cross-River suggests the North. But the dictatorial methods of the three rulers and the quasi-military discipline they impose suggest the post coup situation not just in Nigeria, but in many African countries. Then there are such glaring similarities between the massacre of Aiyero men and aliens in Cross-River and the massacre of Ibos in northern Nigeria which lead to Biafra's declaration of independence and the Nigerian Civil War.

The gruesome episode in which a group of villagers hunt down and ritualistically slaughter a helpless victim is suggestive of the mindless cruelty of the times :

Then someone unsheathed a dagger. It rose, glinted briefly in the sun and the old man stooped and drew it across the throat of the prostrate figure. His hand moved again, this time down the body, the knife-tip drew a swift practical circle on the crotch and his other hand held up the victim's genitals. He passed it to one of the many eager hands which also

uselessly held open a jaw that had opened wide to thrust out pain. Into that mouth they thrust his penis with the testicles. Then they all stepped back and looked on the transformation they had wrought.¹¹

That Soyinka is not exaggerating is borne by independent accounts of the events leading to Biafra and the violence and mayhem in its wake.

Thus we see that Soyinka's writing, though lacking the revolutionary exterior of Ngugi's, is basically aligned with the writing world over, which swears by direct action when dealing with state terrorism. There are two outstanding reasons for supposing this : First, Soyinka in his own life was the quintessential revolutionary, for as Se'Kou Toure' said¹²: "To take part in the African revolution it is not enough to write a revolutionary song; you must fashion the revolution with the people There is no place outside that fight for the artist or for the intellectual who is not himself concerned with and completely at one with the people in the great battle of Africa and of suffering humanity".

Soyinka took this role of the artist quite seriously as his numerous jail terms and trials would attest.

¹¹ Wole Soyinka, *Season of Anomy*, London : Rex Collins, 1973, p. 164.

¹² *Presence Africaine*, XXIV-XXV, p. 110.

Again, Soyinka does not hold any brief for what he calls the quasi-humanistic literature of reconciliation. For as Soyinka says¹³, "it is not necessary to go so far as to accept Trotsky's principle that all literature written in a situation of revolutionary confrontation cannot but be imbued with the spirit of social hatred. It is logical, however, to expect that literature which sets out to depict the realities of such a situation must reflect that social hatred in the components of the resolution. One cannot stand outside it all and impose a pietistic resolution plucked from some rare region of the artist's uncontaminated soul. To do this is not to be a 'visionary' but to be starry-eyed". Soyinka, the revolutionary is repelled by the mawkishness.

The kind of writing to which Soyinka gives unqualified assent is the one which embodies social vision as opposed to mere ideology. As Soyinka puts it:¹⁴

A creative concern which conceptualizes or extends actuality beyond the purely narrative, making it reveal realities beyond the immediately attainable, a concern which upsets orthodox acceptances in an effort to free society of historical or other superstitions; these are qualities possessed

¹³ Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Cambridge University Press, 1976, pp. 72-73.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

by literature of a social vision. Revolutionary writing is generally of this kind. The intellectual and imaginative impulse to a re-examination of the propositions on which man, nature and society are posited or interpreted at any point in history; the effort to expand those propositions or to contest and replace them with others more in tune with the writer's own idealistic disposition or his pragmatic, resolving genius; this impulse and its integrative role in the ordering of experience and events leads to a work of social vision".

Quite early in his career Soyinka saw through the deficiencies of Negritude and rejected it as an unwholesome response to the colonial dilemma. However, he was never unmindful of its central role in shaping the attitudes of a whole generation of African writers and intellectuals. It is perhaps because of this that he gives it such a detailed attention in his book *Myth, Literature and the African World*.

About Negritude Soyinka holds that the vision in itself was that of "restitution and re-engineering" of a racial psyche. In attempting to achieve this laudable goal, however, Negritude made the error of over-

simplification. "Its re-entrenchment of black values was not preceded by any profound effort to enter into this African system of values". In attempting to refute the evaluation to which black reality had been subjected, "Negritude adopted the Manichean tradition of European thought and inflicted it on a culture which is most radically anti-Manichean".¹⁵ Soyinka elaborates it thus with the help of a pair of syllogisms:¹⁶

(a) Premise I : Analytical thought is a mark of high human development.

Premise II : The European employs analytical thought.

Inference : Therefore the European is highly developed.

(b) Premise I : Analytical thought is a mark of high human development.

Premise II : The African is incapable of analytical thought.

Inference : Therefore the African is not highly developed.

According to Soyinka the fundamental error committed by the Negritudists was not to have questioned the conclusion of (a) and to have fully accepted the premises of both syllogisms. Out of this basic error arose the Negritudist's syllogism :

(c) I. Intuitive understanding is also a mark of human development.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 127.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 127-28.

- II. The African employs intuitive understanding.
- III. Therefore the African is highly developed.

Thus, Negritude according to Soyinka "accepted one of the most commonplace blasphemies of racism that the black man has nothing between his ears, trapping itself in a defensive role".¹⁷

Not only this, Soyinka takes issue with Negritude on yet another point :

Negritude was a creation by and for a small elite. The search for a racial identity was conducted by and for a minuscule minority of uprooted individuals, not merely in Paris but in the metropolis of the French colonies. At the same time as this historical phenomenon was taking place a drive through the real Africa, among the real populace of the African world, would have revealed that these millions had never at any time had cause to question the existence of their Negritude. This is why even in a country like Senegal where Negritude is the official ideology of the regime, it remains a curiosity for the bulk of

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 129.

the population and an increasingly shopworn and dissociated expression even among the younger intellectuals and litterateurs.¹⁰

And it is here that we begin to appreciate the plausibility, the force and the decisive thrust of Wole Soyinka's logic with respect to the African imbroglio. It is a voice, urbane and disillusioned; a voice refusing to play to the gallery. It is this ability to negotiate the African situation frontally while at the same time refusing resolutely to be snared by nationalist polemics that lends to Soyinka's vision a centrality and authenticity.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 135.

CHAPTER IV

NGUGI W/A THIONGO :

MARXISM AS PANACEA -

FRANCHISING THE SUBALTERN

NGUGI WA THIONGO

MARXISM AS PANACEA : FRANCHISING THE SUBALTERN

With the publication of *Weep Not, Child*¹ in 1964 James Ngugi appeared on the African literary scene, becoming the first important novelist from East Africa. As a result of more limited educational opportunities than those available in West Africa the novel made a belated beginning in East Africa. The title is taken from Walt Whitman's poem, "On the Beach at Night". It opens with the epigraph :

Weep not, child

Weep not, my darling

With these kisses let me remove your tears

The ravening clouds shall not be long victorious

They shall not long possess the sky ...

The novel turns out to be the story of the battle for the possession of the sky (i.e. Kenya) between the ravening clouds (the Imperialist power) and the masses. It is the story of the days of Mau-Mau rebellion in the 1950s. The novel explores the colonial history of Kenya by dealing with the Mau-Mau movement; a guerrilla movement that did not have a parallel in Uganda or Tanganyika. In his novel *Something of Value*² Robert Ruark had characterized the Mau-Mau

¹ Ngugi wa Thiongo, *Weep Not Child*, London : Heinemann, 1964.

² See Peter Nazareth in *The Iowa Review*, Spring / Summer 1976.

movement as savage and atavistic. Ngugi reverses this assessment and shows us the historical rationality behind the movement. Although Ngugi makes us sympathetic to the Mau-Mau struggle he also presents a fair picture of the white settlers whose interests were threatened.

In large part the success of the novel - its beauty and its horror - consists exactly in this presentation of an historical event so recent that hardly any adult Kenyan reading the book will fail to remember the Mau-Mau rebellion which involved everyone, the evil and the innocent. Ngugi's supreme achievement is in illustrating how individual families came to be pulled in different directions as various members formed new loyalties and rejected older ones within the traditional power structure.

The result is a powerful picture of Kenya undergoing a war of liberation, a violent time of chaos and destruction in which it became impossible for any child or adult to remain neutral to the events purging the land. Although Ngugi's concentration is upon one specific family the treatment is so complete that the family becomes the microcosm of the entire nation.

The novel is about three young men who have joined the rebellion and who despise their father Ngotho, because he has not dared to take the Mau-Mau oath. One of the three sons is suspected of having killed a rich African farmer, Jacobo, who had collaborated with the authorities. To redeem himself in his son's eyes Ngotho confesses

to the murder himself. He is horribly tortured but fails to convince the police of his guilt.

Boro, Jacob's murderer, asks his father's forgiveness after his release and acquits himself by killing the white plantation owner at the head of the forces trying to put down the rebellion. He is executed while Ngotho dies as a result of the torture during detention. According to Claude Wauthier³ the two main themes of the trilogy (*Weep Not Child*, *The River Between* and *A Grain of Wheat*) are "on the one hand the conflict between the generations and on the other, the themes of cowardice and courage".

In *The River Between*⁴ (originally titled *The Black Messiah*) published in 1965 Ngugi deals with what the Nigerian critic Omalara Leslie⁵ has called "the soft paw of colonialism : the division brought about by Christianity acting sometimes unconsciously but usually consciously in tandem with colonialism". *The River Between* has been called Ngugi's East African counterpart to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the picture of a traditional African society undergoing the initial frustrations of Westernization.

What Ngugi develops in *The River Between* is the theme that a people's religion and a people's way of life must be one; each must

³ Claude Wauthier, *The Literature and Thought of Modern Africa*, London : Heinemann, 1978, p. 315.

⁴ Ngugi wa Thiongo, *The River Between*, London : Heinemann, 1965.

⁵ Peter Nazareth, *ibid.*, p. 252.

grow out of the other. In the novel Honia river is described as flowing between the two opposing ridges, Makuyu and Kamenno. On one side of the river the Christians of Makuyu conduct their Christmas celebrations while on the other side the tribe conducts its rite of circumcision.

And it is here, on the banks of Honia, that Muthoni, a Christian from Makuyu – is made a woman of the tribe through circumcision (cliterodectomy, to be precise), and here again that Walyaki from Kamenno and Nyambura from Makuyu come together in their embrace. Honia river is the site and witness of these two symbolic acts of the coming together of the tribe and the Christian religion and is itself a symbol of that unity.

Ngugi's third novel, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967)⁶ is his most impressive work. Like *Weep Not, Child* it returns to recent Kenyan history - the state of emergency during the Mau-Mau revolt which lasted from 1952 to 1960. The plot of the novel takes the form of a series of flashbacks into the past lives of the three protagonists during a village's independence celebrations. Two former detainees, Mugo and Gikonyo, who are regarded as heroes and who were to preside over the celebrations prove to have been traitors. The first had denounced a Mau-Mau Chief Kihika, and the second had confessed to taking the Mau-Mau oath in order to obtain his freedom. Mumbi, Gikonyo's wife

⁶ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat*, London : Heinemann, 1967.

and Kihika's sister had slept with a colonial stooge during her husband's captivity.

A Grain of Wheat is also one of the best examples of the African situational novel. Unlike Ngugi's two earlier books which mirrored the turmoil through one or two characters, *A Grain of Wheat* has no central character. Instead there are six characters who play almost equally important parts in the checkerboard development of the story itself, and at least another six whose parts are indispensable to the action and narrative thread of the story. If there is any main character in the novel it is the village of Thabai itself – the communal consciousness. *A Grain of Wheat* intellectually probes the nature of power, nationalism and unity – themes that have been reiterated throughout all of Ngugi's writings. Symbolically, like Wole Soyinka in *A Dance of the Forests* Ngugi is saying that the politics of the present can only be built on an understanding of the past, that each man must come to a realization of his past in the best way he can and that in the process there are bound to be those who will be hunted and pursued because they have distorted their past by shrugging their responsibility to the group – to the nation.

The title of the novel comes from the book of Corinthians (1, 15 : 36-38):

Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not
quickened, except it die. And that which thou

sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall
be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat or
of some other grain.

However, having dealt briefly with these three novels and having delineated their commanding concern we can say that despite their value as documents in the making of a novelist and his themes these novels remain prefatorial to Ngugi's magnum opus *Petals of Blood*. It is a work in which ten years of harsh experience, intellectual growth, self criticism and deepening understanding provide a subject to which Ngugi is now magnificently equal.

Petals of Blood⁷

A writer as perceptive as Ngugi could not have remained indifferent to a problem so pressing as the workings of international capitalism in post-independence Kenyan society, nor could the son of Mau-Mau rebellion have ignored for long the hijacking of the revolution and its exalted objective by the new breed of faceless politicians and their cohorts in business and bureaucracy. It is a world :

... built on a structure of inequality and
injustice, in a world where some can eat while
others can only toil, some can send their
children to school and others cannot, a world

⁷ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood*, London : Heinemann, 1977.

where a prince, a monarch, a businessman can sit on billions while people starve or hit their heads against church walls for divine deliverance from hunger; yes a world where a man who has never set foot on this land can sit in a New York office and determine what I shall read, think, eat and do only because he sits on a heap of billions taken from the world's poor.*

Kenya under self rule is condemned to be witness to the worst kind of chicanery and charlatanism in almost all walks of life; politics being the worst affected. Nderi, for instance, the Member of Parliament converts the money he had collected from his constituents for a water project into security for loans, buying shares in companies and investing in land, housing and small business. He has become one of the country's wealthiest capitalists, a glaring illustration of a common phenomenon in Africa – the use of politics as a stepping stone to material aggrandizement. The party in power also comes in for the most scathing denunciation because of its corruption, thuggery, sectionalism and indifference to the people's plight. Not only this; in a grotesque parody of the Mau-Mau oath the party forces people to swear an oath intended to perpetuate the complete dominance of a particular tribe.

* Ibid., p. 240.

Nderi, the Member of Parliament belongs to the category of traitors – traitors of the people. It is they who now ride the sleek Mercedes Benz, resort to golf clubs once frequented by the white imperialists, where they clinch business deals, visit expensive night clubs, exploit women and hold frivolous parties. While highlighting all this Ngugi also forcefully registers his concern at the exploitation of the toiling masses. He also stresses the fact that the corruption of the system results in under utilization of potential and waste of resources, human and material. The disillusionment and disenchantment and setback of morale resulting from corruption are detrimental to nation building. We are immediately reminded of Wole Soyinka's *Interpreters* which touched on these same themes.

Education has always been a central item on Ngugi's agenda and in *The River Between* we have seen Waiyaki's zeal for education. In *Petals of Blood* the purpose and content of imperialist education is thoroughly scrutinized and its relevance to African situation questioned. Cambridge Fraudsham (the name is itself suggestive), the eccentric head master who terrorizes students and eventually provokes student riots, and his African successor Chui, are embodiments of this educational system. When Karega along with other revolutionaries organizes strikes against this system they demand an African history and African literature to be taught by an African teacher under an African headmaster.

It is the same Karega who comes to the rescue of Ilmorog, which is the scene of most of the events of the novel. A microcosm of Kenyan society Ilmorog grows in the course of the novel from a small traditional village into a modern capitalist complex. Ilmorog is blighted by drought while its Member of Parliament, Nderi, sits away in the cool comfort of his capitalist empire. Karega the teacher puts forward the daring plan that they should march to the city, confront their M.P. with their problems and force him to acknowledge his responsibilities. The march is a great physical and spiritual ordeal which tests the people's capacity for endurance and brings out the best in the leaders.

As a result of this march Ilmorog turns new leaf. But as the capitalists move in with their paraphernalia the old, traditional Ilmorog is irreplaceably destroyed. The reader watches with profound sympathy as the bewildered and deceived peasants unable to match the business acumen and financial standing of the big men from the city inevitably lose their lands and other possessions and degenerate into labourers or worse.

And this, precisely, is Ngugi's point. On the one hand we have Abdullah who during the march to the city becomes the rallying force sustaining the others inspite of his physical disability. But in the midst of the ensuing prosperity which would be said to be a direct result of his efforts he is degraded and ends up as the most abject peasant forced to sell oranges and skins by the way-side for a living. We must not

forget that Abdullah was maimed during the Mau-Mau Emergency, and ironically it is those who almost sacrificed their lives during the Mau-Mau struggle for liberation that are the most degraded in independent Kenya. For Abdullah it has been a long and endless wait for justice :

"I waited for land reforms and redistribution.

I waited for a job.

I waited for a statue to Kimathi as a memorial to the fallen.

I waited."⁹

In order to appreciate Ngugi's obsession with the Mau Mau insurrection and emergency we must take into account the mentally traumatising and physically incapacitating encounters during the Mau-Mau years. The scene of the beating up in *Land of Sunshine : Scenes of Life in Kenya before Mau-Mau*¹⁰ is taken from real life. Muga Gicaru tells how two European officers, accompanied by African police, interrogated eight Negroes arrested during an enquiry into a theft : truncheon blows rain, but there is also torture applied to the genitals. The narrator is released because he is young and not yet circumcised.

Some of the most recent evidence on prisons and detention camps in Africa appears in Josiah Mwangi Kariuki's¹¹ account of his own experiences. He was in fourteen successive camps in seven years from

⁹ Ibid., p. 254.

¹⁰ Muga Gicaru, London : Lawrence and Wishart, 1958.

¹¹ Josiah Mwangi Kariuki : *Mau-Mau Detainee*. London and New York : Oxford University Press, 1963.

1953-60, suspected of being a Mau-Mau sympathiser. A striking photograph of the informers dressed in long hooded robes revealing only their eyes who decided the classification of detainees into unrepentant hard core, heavily infected but not unreclaimable, and clear or rehabilitated is an illustration of the psychological methods used by the penal authorities. These agents were themselves Africans.

The author also tells of maltreatment of prisoners which in several cases led to their deaths. The author of *Mau-Mau Detainee* estimates that 80,000 Kenyans had experience of the camps set up by the British colonial authorities. The Christian religion, as Eustace Palmer has shown is presented here as oppressive, unsympathetic and hypocritical. The portrayal of Munira's father is central to this exposure of religion. This man who is a patriarch of the church as well as a pillar of the state is actually a capitalist and black slaver of the most rabid sort. This determined opportunist who in his younger days turned his back on the traditional society and joined hands with the white man, and in his later years supported the white oppressors against the Mau Mau freedom fighters non participates whole heartedly in the sordid exploitation of the masses.

It is Karega who confirms one's impression that Ngugi has been gradually leaning over to socialism as the solution to Africa's problems. Karega comes to the conclusion that for a proper and equitable

reorganization of society people must go back to their African origins to learn lessons from the way African people produced and organized their wealth before the advent of colonialism. The implication is that it was colonialism that brought in inequality, injustice and capitalism to Africa. There is little doubt that Ngugi endorses Karega's socialist analysis and considers his solution - solidarity of the workers and the masses – as the hope for the future. It is a world in which :

goodness and beauty and strength and courage
would be seen not in how cunning one can be,
not in how much power to oppress one
possessed, but only in one's contribution in
creating a more humane world.¹²

No doubt then that *Petals of Blood* points its finger in the right direction : the ravages of drought, the cynical attitude of the comprador bourgeoisie towards the rural areas and the catastrophic results of capitalist 'development' are all urgently topical themes. The obvious concern of *Petals of Blood*, as has been noted is "the rottenness of the 'New Kenya', the resurgence of the militant spirit of anti-colonialism and a new socialist awakening".¹³

¹² *Petals of Blood*, p. 303.

¹³ Stewart Crehan, 'The Politics of the Signifier : Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*' in *Post Colonial Literatures : Achebe, Ngugi Desai, Walcott* (New Casebooks) eds. Michael Parker and Roger Starky, London : Macmillan, 1995, p. 119.

ness in their bearing; workers and peasants who proclaimed their history with unashamed pride and who denounced its betrayal with courage.¹⁴

The religious intensity that Ngugi imparts to the idea of revolution as the ultimate key to the problems of Africa is given its rightful religious treatment in Ngugi's recent novel *Devil on the Cross*.

DEVIL ON THE CROSS¹⁵

In the case of Africa, the identification of Christianity and Islam with imperialist exploitation has historical foundation in the roles these religions have wittingly or unwittingly played in African development from the time of slavery.

On his part, Ngugi has shown in successive novels a growing impatience with the socio-political role of Christianity in Kenyan history. As a bourgeois intellectual in the fifties and sixties Ngugi's criticism of the role of Christianity was understandably mild in his novels published at that time – *Weep Not, Child*, *The River Between* and *A Grain of Wheat*. However, by the time of writing *Petals of Blood* in the seventies,

¹⁴ 'Education for a National Culture', a paper presented to a seminar in Harare, Sept. 1981. Quoted by Stewart Crehan, *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹⁵ Ngugi wa Thiongo, *Devil on the Cross*, London : Heinemann, 1982. The novel was originally published in Gikuyu language as *Caitani Mutharabaini* by the author in 1980.

Ngugi was already a marxist and predictably organized religion was subjected to savage satire.

By the time of writing the present novel, *Devil on the Cross* Ngugi still regarded religion as an instrument of bourgeois exploitation, but now he is less interested in satire and pits Christianity in an ironic role vis-a-vis capitalism.

The paradoxically symbolic title of the novel immediately announces the author's mischievous intention of forcing the Christian religion into a non-traditional role. The first hint about the identity of the devil is given in the note tossed to the heroine, Wariinga, by one of the thugs hired by her landlord to evict her from a rented room :

'We are the Devil's Angels : Private Business-men'. Make the slightest move to take this matter to the authorities, and we shall issue you with a single ticket to God's kingdom or Satan's – a one way ticket to Heaven or Hell.'¹⁶

More revelations concerning the devil's identity come as the narrator recalls the recurrent nightmare that plagues Wariinga. She is revisited by a nightmare that she used to have when, as a student of Nakuru Day Secondary school she attended the 'Church of the Holy Rosary'.

¹⁶ *Devil on the Cross*, p. 10.

She saw first the darkness, carved upon at one side to reveal a Cross, which hung in the air. Then she saw a crowd of people dressed in rags, walking in the light, propelling the devil towards the Cross. The Devil was clad in a silk suit and he carried a walking stick shaped like a folded umbrella. Near the Cross he began to tremble He moaned, beseeching the people not to crucify him.

But the people cried in unison : 'Now we know the secrets of all the robes that disguise your cunning. You commit murder, then you don your robes of pity and you go to wipe the tears from the faces of orphans and widows' And there and then the people crucified the Devil on the Cross and went away singing songs of victory.

After three days, there came others dressed in suits and ties, who, keeping to the wall of darkness, lifted the Devil down from the Cross. And they knelt before him, and they prayed to him in loud voices, beseeching him

to give them a portion of his robes of cunning.

And their bellies began to swell.¹⁷

The details to be noted are that (a) Wariinga's nightmare used to take place when she attended Church, (b) the devil has an enormous sagging belly, (c) the devil is crucified by a crowd of people in rags.

Soon after these details of the dream are provided, the reader meets first of two variants of an invitation card to a feast in Ilmorog. The first card bearing the heading 'The Devil's Feast I' is fake and is printed by those who oppose the feast while the genuine card is titled 'A Big Feast I' The objective of the feast as explained by Mwireri wa Mukiraai, a sympathiser, is this :

First things first. This feast is not a Devil's feast, and it has not been organized by Satan. This feast has been arranged by the Organization for Modern Theft and Robbery in Ilmorog to commemorate a visit by foreign guests from an organization for the Thieves and robbers of the Western world, particularly from America, England, Germany, France, Italy, Sweden and Japan, called the International Organization of Thieves and Robbers.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 13-14.

Secondly, our university students have become very conceited. They have now devised ways of discrediting theft and robbery even before they know what modern theft and robbery really is. These students are spreading the kind of talk I have just heard that theft and robbery should end.

So I would like to say this : I am very sure that people can never be equal like teeth. Human nature has rejected equality. Even universal nature herself has rejected any absurd nonsense about equality. Just look at God's Heaven. God sits on the throne. On his right stands his only Son. On his left side stands the Holy Spirit. At his feet the angels sit. At the feet of the angels sit the saints. At the feet of the saints sit all the Disciples and so on, one rank standing below another until we come to the class of believers here on Earth. Hell is structured in the same way.¹⁶

Ironically the explanation given by the sympathiser confirms the immorality of the feast. The conscience of Mr. Mukiraai is so totally dead

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 78.

that he not only fails to see the immorality of theft and robbery but actually defends them with a measure of self righteousness.

The events of the feast as it takes place inside a cave in Ilmorog reveal that Mr. Mukiraai is in fact a benevolent devil compared to the generality of the delegates attending the feast. All the details of Warlinga's nightmare are represented in the setting, characters and episodes of the feast. Firstly, the feast takes place on a Sunday. It commences in a solemn atmosphere reminiscent of Church services as the Master of Ceremonies, like a priest recounts his own version of the Biblical parable of the talents. '... For the Kingdom of Earthly Wiles can be likened unto a ruler ...'

Secondly, the delegates at the feast exhibit the physical traits characteristic of the devil in Warlinga's nightmare. The black men invariably have a protruding stomach : "Here, in this cave, we are interested only in people who steal because their bellies are full," the master of ceremonies said patting his stomach'. Thereafter, those who mount the platform to explain why they should be crowned the king of thieves are almost uniformly alike. One has 'a belly that protruded so far that it would have touched the ground had it not been supported by the braces that held up his trousers'.

Thirdly, in the novel's action, just as the devil in Warlinga's nightmare is chased and crucified by the crowd of people in rags, so are the delegates at the feast chased out of the cave by a procession of

people, many of whom 'had rags for clothes. Many had no shoes. The routing of the delegates in a battle for the cave is however, only provisional. The initially victorious ragged crowd is ultimately defeated by the devil in both instances. In the nightmare, the devil after his crucifixion by the crowd is multiplied and transformed into his disciples; at the cave the routing (crucifixion) of the delegates (the Devil) is avenged by the soldiers (Devil's disciples) who kill five and would many more of the righteous crowd.

The clue to the symbolic meaning of the cave feast is contained in the following parable which features as a consistent religious motif throughout the novel :

... For the Kingdom of the Earthly can be likened unto a ruler who foresaw that the day would come when he would be thrown out of a certain country by the masses and their guerrilla freedom fighters. He was much troubled in his heart, trying to determine ways of protecting all the property he had accumulated in that country and also ways of maintaining his rule over the natives by other means. He asked himself :
What shall I do

And it came to pass that as the ruler was about to return to his home abroad, he again

called together all his servants and gave them the key to the land, telling them : 'The patriotic guerrillas and the masses of this country will now be deceived because you are all black, as they are, and they will chant : "See, now our own black people have the key to our country; see now our own black people hold the steering wheel. What were we fighting for if not this? Let us now put down our arms and sing hymns of praise to our black lords."¹⁹ Then he gave them his property and goods to look after and even to increase and multiply ... And so the lord went away, leaving by the front-door.

And it came to pass that before many days had elapsed the lord came back to that country through the back door. He called his servants to account for the property and the money that he had given to each.¹⁹

Thus, the feast at the cave is the reunion of the former colonial masters represented by people of the multinational companies and the Kenyan ruling elites represented by their businessmen.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 82-86.

The way the Master of Ceremonies has recast the biblical parable shows that he is speaking about the nature of the political independence granted to African countries and the relationship existing between the former colonial masters and the African governing elites. The Master of Ceremonies says : 'The flag of independence can be likened unto a man travelling unto a far country'²⁰

Mr. Mukirai stands for the servant in the parable who buries his talents (share of capital got from the former master the multinational capitalist), his reason being that he prefers national capitalism and, therefore, resists the control of multinationals. Mr. Nguunji, who like many of the delegates had been a saboteur of the fight for independence, dislikes Mr. Mukirai's nationalist position. He tells his colleagues: "Let's all forget the past. All that business of fighting for freedom was just a bad dream, a meaningless nightmare. Let's join hands to do three things : to grab, to extort money and to confiscate. The Holy Trinity of theft : Grabbing, Extortion, and Confiscation."²¹

The idealization of the positive proletarian hero in contrast to the caricaturing of bourgeois characters, the optimism of the total depiction and the practical demonstration – Ngugi's use of psychological realism creates a situation whereby even the most fabulous episodes in the novel

²⁰ Ibid., p. 174.

²¹ Ibid., p. 177.

are realistically motivated. Wariinga's mystery voice, for instance is nothing but the voice of her inner mind offering advice and suggesting solutions.

Being a devout Christian and spiritually inclined person, she usually internalizes her experience and gives expression to them in religious terms. For instance since her young religious mind cannot conceive of any being other than the devil to be capable of such heights of religious hypocrisy, social-political corruption and the brutal sexual and material exploitation suffered by the Kenyans at the hands of the bourgeoisie, she consequently equates the latter with the devil incarnate.

Ngugi's strategy in *Devil on the Cross* seems, therefore, to have created a paradoxical situation whereby the reader seems to be witnessing the unfolding of the Christian process of beatification of a marxist revolutionary. Characters like Muturi, Wariinga and Wangari are at different stages of marxist consciousness. While Muturi is fully formed, Wariinga and Wangari are rapidly growing in social consciousness as a result of deepening oppression and exploitation at the hands of Kenyan bourgeoisie. The direct result of the awakening consciousness is the forging of the unity of the holy trinity' of workers, peasants and students.

So the ultimate hope in Ngugi as in Chinua Achebe is riveted on the workers, peasants and students but the difference lies in methods. It is a difference of style and not of substance.

CHAPTER V

MONGO BETI :

OF PRIGGLISH PRIESTS AND

BLUNDERING MISSIONARIES

MONGO BETI

OF PRIGGISH PRIESTS AND BLUNDERING MISSIONARIES

Mongo Beti is the pseudonym of Alexander Biyidi, who also wrote under the pseudonym Eza-Boto. A cameroonian francophone novelist, short story writer and author of some non-fictional works, Beti has been placed among the most perceptive of the French-African writers.

This fact of Beti's being a novelist from a French colony carries special significance for us. Between the English and French imperialist practices there was a world of difference. The English administrators were generally content with exercising political, military and administrative control leaving the civilizing mission to the missionaries whom they generally regarded with a certain amused tolerance. They preferred the system of indirect rule, making use of the traditional rulers whom they were quite content to leave to exercise their functions within their traditional milieu.

On the other hand the French practiced the policy of assimilation by means of which the cream of African traditional society was put through a thoroughly French system of education with the intention of making them black Frenchmen who were completely at home in French culture. However, during and after their studies in France, francophone

intellectuals discovered that inspite of their impeccably French education and their genuine abilities they were not totally accepted as Frenchmen while at the same time they became alienated from their traditional roots. Thus, according to Eustace Palmer, "They were caught in a cruel dilemma leading to a reaction against the system which had produced them and a determined struggle to rediscover their lost identity".¹

His first novel, *Ville Cruelle* (*Cruel Town*, 1954), appeared under the name of Eza-Boto. Though Beti eventually rejected both the novel and the pen-name, the book foreshadowed the subjects of his later work. Beti's theme is the destructive influence of colonialism – particularly in education and religion – and his principal method is satire, often presented from the viewpoint of a young, naive narrator.

All three of Mongo Beti's novels – *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba* (*The Poor Christ of Bomba*) 1950²; *Mission terminée* (*Mission to Kala*) 1957³; and *Le roi miracle* (*King Lazarus*) 1958⁴ – comment, in a mixture of light hearted farce and bitter satire on the problems encountered in the quest for an intellectual direction and present us with a critical portrayal of the man of ideas, the potential guide of the disoriented African.

¹ Eustace Palmer, *The Growth of the African Novel*, London : Heinemann, 1979, p. 125.

² Mongo Beti, *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, London : Heinemann, 1971.

³ Mongo Beti, *Mission to Kala*, London : Heinemann, 1964.

⁴ Mongo Beti, *King Lazarus*, London : Heinemann, 1970.

Mongo Beti's African village is situated at the meeting point of traditional communal life and a new awareness of imminent change. Within this context he raises the problem of intellectual direction by introducing into the village, protagonists who are bearers of western ideas as well as actual or potential guides for the villagers in their prospective odyssey into the modern world. The novels form a loose trilogy that describes the encounter between the village on one hand (as a virtual personification of a way of life) and the protagonists on the other, during the last three decades of the colonial rule. *The Poor Christ of Bomba* takes place in the late nineteen thirties at a time when European colonialism is still in complete control of Africa. *King Lazarus* is set in the late nineteen forties and touches on the liberalization of the colonial regime brought about by the Great War. In *Mission to Kala*, set in the nineteen fifties, the colonial authorities no longer appear as the action is located strictly within the African community.

This time span of some twenty years brings only one essential change to the village. The two novels set in the post world war period highlight a situation of conflict between the generations that is absent from the pre-war milieu of *The Poor Christ of Bomba*. Apart from this development there is little to distinguish the early peasant society of one novel from that of another. It is an essentially pagan society, but pagan in the popular sense of the word with none of the animist-religious baggage that we find in Camara Laye's 'Kouroussa' or

Achebe's 'Umuofia'. Mongo Beti's peasants are "fun loving materialists, possessed of an earthy good sense and considerable physical vitality. They live in what is still a stable, at times even stagnant, village society that is tightly ruled by the conventions of African social tradition."⁶

Into this stable peasant world Beti introduces two types of protagonists : European missionaries and African students. Both of these, as one would expect, bring with them western ideas, but in the context of Mongo Beti's conception of a materialist and socially conservative African society they also introduce a new kind of man; a man of ideas and learning, guided not solely by convention or self interest.

The first novel is dominated by the figure of the 'Christ' of the mission of Bomba, the Reverend Father Drumont. In the novel, set in the late nineteen forties, *Kind Lazarus*, Father Drumont's former assistant, Father Le Guen, shares the spotlight with two African students, Kris and Bitama. In *Mission to Kala*, an African student Jean Medza is the sole protagonist.

Beti's first novel *The Poor Christ of Bomba* was so effective in its exposure of French imperialist attitudes that it provoked a storm on its publication in 1956. In this novel the focus is on Rev. Father Drumont

⁶ Claude Wauthier, *The Language and Thought of Modern Africa*, London : Heinemann Educational Books, 1978, p. 268.

and his unavailing attempts to impose a rather austere and authoritarian version of Roman Catholicism on a proud people – here the inhabitants of Tala country.

In Beti's account, the Father emerges as a harsh, obstinate, unfeeling, conceited and authoritarian. He is utterly contemptuous of and brutal towards the African people whose shepherd he claims to be. In the very first few pages of the novel we get the true picture of Rev. Father Drumont. Instead of a loving, forgiving Christ who is fond of children and asks that they be brought to him we see a Father who shouts out angrily at mothers for allowing their babies to cry in church. We also see his inhumanity which is no different from that of the civil authorities, in extorting forced labour from the people in order to build his church.

So too is the Father's inflexibility which will not allow a penniless old woman to take the sacrament because her church dues have not been paid, even though everyone including the uncritical narrator is moved by the old woman's tale of woe. The concepts of love and mercy are completely absent from the Father's creed. In his view being a good Christian consists in paying one's church dues and severing all connections with one's polygamous relatives, if any.

Eustace Palmer⁸ holds that Father's religion is :

⁸ Eustace Palmer, *The Growth of the African Novel*, London : Heinemann, 1979, p. 128.

... a life denying force which fails to come to terms with indigenous law and custom. He fails to see that it is both unnecessary and undesirable to attempt to smother beneath the superficial trappings of Roman Catholicism the age old culture of the people from which they derive their sense of identity, and most of his high handed actions are concerned with his attempts to suppress some aspects or other of traditional life.

Against this background is placed the central act which determines the direction of the novel. Given the proud intransigence of the Talans (the people of Tala country), the Father decides to abandon them to their own devices for three years in the hope that they will discover the need of God in the interval, but the plan backfires, and when he discovers its failure he decides to return home for good, leaving a mess behind him for others to clear up.

The central action of the novel is the Father's tour through the Tala country accompanied by his cook Zakaria and Dennis, the narrator Eustace Palmer⁷ believes that like Beti's second novel *Mission to Kala*, "*The Poor Christ of Bomba*" takes the form of a picaresque tale whose

⁷ Ibid., p. 142.

significance lies not so much in the events as in the moral development of the participants. However, Charles E. Nnolim⁸ disagrees and believes that to call these novels picaresque is,

... misleading because the plot of the classic picaresque novel is mainly episodic and character growth is almost nil. Beyond this, the classic picaro normally comes from the lowest stratum of society, has little breeding, lives on his wits and only a very thin line separates his rascality from actual criminality. A picaro is always a prankster and a rascal who begins and ends as one with little or no character development.

Here I would agree with Charles Nnolim and though allowing for the fact that the journey motif shapes the novelistic form to a large extent, would stop short of calling *The Poor Christ of Bomba* a picaresque novel.

The Father discovers to his chagrin that far from arousing in the people a stronger desire for the Christian faith, the three year's spiritual deprivation has caused them to forget Christianity and return to their

⁸ Charles E. Nnolim, 'Perils of Syncritism' in *Phylon : The Atlanta University Review of Race and Culture*, 47:2, 1986, p. 143.

traditional ways. The following is the condition in which the Father finds the church on his return :

"I followed the Father and the catechist into the chapel, whose interior was in still worse condition. The mat roof swinging from its nails looked more like a fishing net and you could see the sky through it as if you stood in the open air. Naturally, the earth floor was pock-marked all over by the rain and the walls are streaked with laterite. Logs lie scattered about the floor and these are the seats ... The catechist says that the men all refuse to come and repair the place. If he goes to summon one individually, the news spreads like wild fire and everyone else vanishes.⁹

Throughout the journey it is the same tale of dilapidated churches, polygamous husbands unmarried mothers and non-payment of church dues.

There is more to it however, Beti contrives around the embattled father an elaborate network of debauchery and moral insolvency. Zakaria, the Father's cook is a living picture of irresponsibility and

⁹ Mongo Beti, *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, pp. 16-17.

sinecurism and the Father's irrational attachment for him which is quite in disproportion to his (Zakaria's) merit is generally interpreted as being the result of a homosexual relation between the two.

Again, there is the scandal relating to the 'Sixa'. Sixa is the place where girls are kept apparently to prepare them for Christianity, so that they make good Christians on conversion. Ironically, this is also the place where the girls are initiated into sexual knowledge. The shameful racket flourishes under the nose of the Father and its manager is Raphael, the director of the Sixa. There is also another side to the Sixa story, however, and Palmer sees it as an instance of the essentially "anti-life, cruel and dehumanized impulses of the Father".¹⁰ He further elaborates :

We also see his (Father's) inhumanity which is no different from that of the civil authorities, in extorting forced labour from the people in order to build his church. Particularly disgraceful is his exploitation of the Sixa girls whom he compulsorily houses within the mission, ostensibly to prepare them for the duties of a Christian wife, but in reality to provide cheap manual labour."¹¹

¹⁰ *The Growth of the African Novel*, p. 128.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

In my opinion it is the fact that the Father in *The Poor Christ of Bomba* is also a man with his share of vices and virtues that is the most outstanding feature of Beti's novelistic art. Beti's tone is so impeccably neutral that any suggestion of tone-fixing on Beti's part is baseless. It is in this context that we have to interpret the celebrated passage towards the opening of the novel. Here is the naïve narrator :

"Surely it isn't blasphemy ... oh no! It even fills me with joy to think that perhaps it was providence, the Holy Ghost himself, who whispered this advice in the Father's ear, 'Tell them that Jesus Christ and the Reverend Father are all one.' Especially when our village children looking at the picture of Christ surrounded by boys were astonished at his likeness to our Father. Same beard, same sautane, same chord around the waist. And they cried out, 'But Jesus Christ is just like the Father! And the Father assured them that Christ and himself were all one. And since then all the boys of my village call the Father 'Jesus Christ'.

Jesus Christ! Oh, I'm sure it is no blasphemy! He really deserves that name, that simple

praise from innocent hearts. A man who has spread faith among us; made good Christians everyday, often despite themselves. A man full of authority. A stern man. A father Jesus Christ!¹²

Palmer's reaction to this passage is characteristic : 'Indeed it is his marked difference from Christ that strikes us and the fact that it is he himself who draws attention to the similarity with Christ indicates his arrogance, conceit and contempt for the people's intelligence'.¹³

But my reading of the passage in the context of the novel reveals that it is Beti's intention that both the similarity and the difference be noted. It is the Father's self that is wedged between the divine and the human. It is the timeless predicament of the Annunciation.

It is also a reminder that a mission, a religion, an idea are all pathetically dependent on the helms-man. Beti wants to drive home the point that Imperialism or the familiar face of it in the colonies was to a very large extent determined by the personality of the colonial administrators as the face of Christianity in Bomba mission is sullied by the ineptness of its representative, Rev. Father Drumont.

¹² *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, p. 3.

¹³ *The Growth of the African Novel*, p. 127.

The Father's sincerity or commitment is no where in doubt. What is open to scrutiny is the nature of his beliefs. His loyalty to his cause, to his mission is unquestioned; it is his vision that is jaundiced. Again, it is a point worth noting that no where in the novel is Father Dreumont directly involved or implicated in any scandal. In all fairness, the biggest shortcoming of the Father is that he is not an administrator.

No simplistic indictment of Beti's missionaries is possible as they are fully rounded figures whose characterization is done with a mixture of empathy and critical verve. Mongo Beti avoids the facile anti-clericalism that turns the missionary figures of his fellow Cameroonian Ferdinand Oyono into caricatures of the most unchristian type of priest, selfish, materialist and scornful of the Blackman. As Thomas Cassirer¹⁴ puts it :

The missionaries are the only figures in the novels whose life is guided by single minded devotion to a faith and they are also the only ones who explicitly believe in a universal humanity that transcends barriers of race and culture. Yet the missionaries faith in universal humanity remains purely abstract because their primitivist view of the African leads them

¹⁴ Thomas Cassirer, 'Mongo Beti and the Civilizational Muddle' in James Donald and Ali Rattansi (eds.), *'Race', Culture and Difference*, London : Sage and Open University, 1992, p. 28.

to treat him as a pure child of nature with no cultural identity of his own.

This inflexibility seems particularly striking in the representatives of a church that has always been known for its ability to incorporate indigenous pre-Christian beliefs and practices into its structure.

It comes then as no surprise that the Africans in *The Poor Christ of Bomba* repeatedly explain the missionaries failure with the statement that "Christ was not a black man". Yet, the missionaries in Beti's novels are too complex to be merely typed as the butt of an anti-colonialist and anti-Christian satire. The predicament of Father Drumont in particular does not result merely from his disregard of the vitality of African customs. In this context it has been very perceptively remarked :

He finds himself defeated as well by the pervasive influence of western materialist civilization even in the African bush. It was his opposition to this materialism that originally brought him to Africa filled with the hope of converting the natives to the Christian faith and thus protecting them from the forces that had corrupted the Europeans. He discovers, however, that his apparent success during the early years of his mission stemmed from a

complete misunderstanding between him and his African converts, who flocked to him precisely in search of the secret of European material success.¹⁵

However, this mutual misunderstanding between the missionary and his African parishioners comes to a head at the climatic ending to the novel when Father Drumont discovers that over the years his African assistants had turned his mission from a centre of Christian piety into a hotbed of corruption. Father Drumont belatedly becomes aware, that his assistant, his cook and their acolytes have exploited the Sixa (a house where African girls spent some months before their marriage to be instructed in the duties of a Christian wife) as a ready source of labour, money and sexual pleasure. In fact the Sixa is revealed to be spreading not so much Christian morals as venereal disease throughout the region. Faced with this horrendous proof that he has served as an agent for the very corruption from which he tried to protect the Africans, Father Drumont returns to Europe in despair. Dwelling on this aspect in detail Cassirer¹⁶ notes :

There is a certain ambivalence in Mongo Beti's treatment of the missionary. While on the one

¹⁵ Eustace Palmer, *The Growth of the African Novel*, p. 132.

¹⁶ Thomas Cassirer 'Mongo Beti and the Civilizational Muddle' in James Donald and Ali Rathansi eds. *Race Culture and Difference*, London : Sage and Open University Press, 1992, p. 33.

hand both *The Poor Christ of Bomba* and *King Lazarus* are thesis novels that refute the missionaries' claim to leadership in modern Africa these same novels also present the missionary protagonist sympathetically as the man of ideals and ideas who strives heroically to overcome conservatism and materialism. He is seen as caught between the two; Imperialism and the African bush.

There are times when Mongo Beti treats the missionary as a comic figure yet he also enlists the reader's sympathy for him through such devices as having the narrative of *The Poor Christ of Bomba* told by Dennis, the young mission boy who is the only sincere Christian among the Africans and in a sense Father Drumont's spiritual son; or by introducing into *King Lazarus's* pages Father Le-Guen's letters to his mother which reveal his singular idealism and spirituality.

As Cassirer sees them 'the missionaries are also the only figures in Mongo Beti's novels whose action the author characterizes as revolutionary. They are unsuccessful, wrongheaded revolutionaries to be sure but no doubt that Beti's efforts are designed to highlight the missionary's role as a catalyst of change.'¹⁷

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 36.

Thus Mongo Beti gives us a double perspective of his protagonist. Seen from the point of view of the uncomprehending African villagers his (the Father's) stature and prestige dissolves into staid comedy and his downfall brings proof of the power of the resistance of the African bush to an alien European way of life. The point of view of the author himself goes beyond this narrow perspective, however. He discerns the heroic as well as the comic qualities of his protagonist.

He respects and even at places admires the missionary's dedication to an idea even as he rejects the validity of that idea for Africa. The missionary emerges in Mongo Beti's novels as the outsider per se; the man of ideas and ideals who finds himself in conflict with the structure of society.

His elimination at the end of the novel is tragic as well as comic since it signifies that the forces of inertia, represented both by the village and by the colonial administration have forced out the troublesome agent of change. From the perspective of the village this might be a welcome change but from the author's point of view it still leaves the village defenceless before the encroaching influence of European civilization.

MISSION TO KALA

In *Mission to Kala* Jean-Marie Medza, the protagonist, returns home from France having failed his second baccalaureate. He discovers to his horror that he is the advocate-designate whose responsibility it is to bring back the wayward wife of his distant cousin, Niam. He sets off towards the unknown, mounted on the chief's bicycle. Horror is quickly replaced by pride and self-satisfaction – until he reaches Kala, the backwood village to which the woman had fled. Here, he meets his cousin Zambo and Mama, his cousin's father. They introduce him to the many, varied characters and aspects of their village.

His classical education earns him – and Mama – a fine flock of animals and birds while his new discovered physical prowess – tutored by Zambo, of course – brings him the distinction of marriage to Edima, young daughter of the Chief.

At last Niam's wife returns; is summarily condemned and fined. Jean-Marie and Edima are immediately despatched on the path of matrimonial bliss and he then decides to return home to face his father, absent at the beginning of the holiday. On his return, however, he discovers that his father's anger is untempered by the delay. Jean-Marie decides to leave Edima, home, flock everything to go in search of ideal happiness with Zambo, his faithful shadow, always at his side.

Mission to Kala is different in some respects from *The Poor Christ of Bomba* and *King Lazarus*. In this novel Europeans are absent. However, Jean Marie with his French education, his feeling of superiority and general self confidence is a fit substitute. Initially he looks upon this mission as a means of exhibiting his superior knowledge. Only later does he realize how inadequate his education and understanding of life really are. Jean Marie is paraded from compound to compound. He gives his version of world affairs, answers questions and the following morning new sheep, fowl or sacks of grain add to his wealth. These evening sessions during which the villagers probe deeper into his learning than any school examiner, make Jean Marie question the infallibility of his knowledge for the first time.

The situations are for the most part unrelated almost entirely and are made to appear as the result of fortuitous conjunction of events. Jean Marie is never able to know for sure what surprise the village and its inhabitants have next in store for him. His stay in the village is a perpetual battle of wits (Jean Marie, about eighteen, is a student at the lycee in a nearby city). It is a humorous account of the adventures of a protagonist who proves inadequate to the situation in which he finds himself. In the course of this narrative Mongo Beti provides us with a half comic, half serious analysis of the situation of the African intellectual when face to face with the African bush.

The mock heroic tone which is sustained throughout the book gives a light touch and perspective to the hero's philosophical quest for paradise. Like the missionaries Mezda views the village in the African bush through the illusions of primitivism. He tends to think of Kala as a happy Eden peopled by ignorant natives who have been spared the torments of a troubled intellectuality. He is very careful, for instance, in what he tells them about his studies, because as he remarks repeatedly, he wants to avoid giving them complexes. He also feels boundless admiration for the four illiterate village youths who are his constant companions, and bemoans the fact that his education prevents him from joining fully in what he conceives to be their uncomplicated instinctual existence.

By the end of the novel Mezda has gained a more realistic understanding of African village society and his position within it. Interestingly his development is the exact opposite of Father Drumont's experience and inference. While the missionary arrives in the bush country of the Tala tribe convinced of the importance of his role and finds himself rejected by the African village, Mezda arrives in Kala convinced that he is an insignificant failure and discovers that he is a man of great importance in the village. The inhabitants regard him as a man of learning who can initiate them into the mysteries of the modern world.

On this point it would be in order to quote in full Eustace Palmer¹⁹ who demonstrates a typical critical attitude :

The emphasis is on the Kalan's effortlessness and spontaneity. We are meant to admire the excellence of their dancing and the expertise of the youngmen's swimming. We also see their lack of inhibitions and of complexes – the boys undress without any sense of shame and plunge naked into the water (thus shaming the inhibited Jean Marie into doing the same) and compare and joke freely about their sexual organs. This naturalness results in a certain openness about sexual matters. Zambo keeps a mistress at home with his father's consent and boys and girls talk frankly about sex. Most of them have had sexual experience, which is regarded as a matter of course here and the fact that Jean Marie, the 'city-slicker' has had none is regarded by them as a sign of immaturity and suggests the stultification of his normal development. We must not make the mistake

¹⁹ *The Growth of the African Novel*, p. 147.

of judging the people of Kala by an alien moral standard and therefore accusing them of promiscuity and lack of discrimination. They control sex here by keeping it in its proper place, but they do not ban it. And it is significant that Kalans are entirely free from venereal disease since there are sanctions operating against it. The very spontaneity of the people's life militates against it for since bathing here is communal among the youth any diseased person would immediately be found out. Again and again in his novels Beti stresses the sexual sophistication among the rural people.

Such commentaries do more harm than the good they intend; first by the condescending tone which misses the point by miles and secondly by committing the mistake of wallowing in critical certitude's while Beti on his part does not allow any such luxury to his readers. His satire cuts left and right, and no attitude or position is sacred enough to go unscathed or unquestioned. Seen from two different angles, sophistication and naiveté go hand in hand.

Any novelist dealing with traditional African society and its transformation under colonial rule cannot but take note of the drastic changes taking place in the Father-son relation. Achebe took note of it in his trilogy in great detail – the characterological approach to Achebe's novels in fact makes good capital out of it – and touched upon it even in *A Man of the People*. Ngugi deployed this theme as the central motif of *Weep Not, Child* and returned to it in *The River Between* in the person of Joshua, and in *Petals of Blood* we have Munira's father. Similarly Beti in *Mission to Kala* takes up the father-son relation and casts it against the background of the familiar scramble for French education for their sons among the more ambitions of African fathers.

In their eagerness to get the maximum out of the new education system and to compensate for their own mediocre careers these fathers whip their sons off to schools in distant cities. The inordinate demands that the system makes on the baffled child and the pressure of parental aspirations proves too much for the child to handle. The under current of dissent and dissatisfaction very often bursts open in form of rebellion. It is a rebellion of a human being against being considered and treated as an instrument; against attempts at dehumanization.

Now, not being the right candidates for initiation from the beginning and deprived of the natural rights of a child like parental love and affection these students have a stunted growth accompanied with

serious psychological complexes. The Dickensian automatons suddenly become alive in these scenes. Labouring under such formidable handicaps these youngsters are unable to make the best out of the education imparted to them, and the blame we see cannot be laid squarely at the doors of the education system.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

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Thirty odd years after independence from the colonial misrule if the African polity – in and outside literature – appears in shambles, it is time we took stock of our inventory of attitudes and stances towards the conundrum that the free African State is. The stridency, rhetoric and polemics of the post colonial African scenario apart we can't fail to notice and take account of the barely concealed unease among the African intelligentsia and their brethren in the third world with the popular diagnosis of the malaise and more so with the prescription for cure. The jubilant panaceas seem to have failed their authors.

In the case of Africa there seems to be a wide-spread tendency in the critical circles to merge the seer, the prophet, the writer of miscellaneous prose and the novelist. But this put into effect yields a very mechanical reading of the novels. What the critics in fact do is to smuggle non existent or barely existent meanings into the text via history, sociology and ethnology while swearing in the name of the text.

Now, this is not difficult to appreciate for as I have tried to show, in present day Africa unfortunately with a politically committed literature there is a committed history and a committed ethnology. And here lies the catch. Circumstances on both side of the great colonial divide notwithstanding; creating a history which is partisan, requiring from its readers a piecemeal approach, is nothing short of an attempt to

infiltrate history with half-truths. Such history does not provide the spark for nurturing creative impulses; on the contrary in its arbitrariness it triggers responses that are utterly self-denying. In evaluating the consciousness in question, then, we are on a treacherous terrain where our only true guide is the text.

A similar case can be made out for the novels written under the ominous shadow of the communist state. As Milan Kundera, the celebrated Czech writer commenting on the reception of his novels in the West noted; If we cannot view the art that comes to us from Prague, Budapest or Warsaw in any other way than by means of this wretched political code, you murder it, no less brutally than the work of the Stalinist dogmatists, and we are quite unable to hear its true voice. The importance of this art does not lie in the fact that it pillories this or that political regime, but that, on the strength of social and human experience of a kind people in the west cannot even imagine, it offers new testimony about mankind. It is time, then, when the texts coming out of Africa are read as human documents, as literature and not as mere pamphlets or manifestoes. All such readings are pathetically labelled and reductive; though perfectly plausible.

The response to the African novel of critics from Africa and South Asia is very often in agreement with that of critics from the West, although for different reasons.

The non-Western response is basically tied to the standpoint of affront, denigration, injury and pillage. It brings its own baggage of complexes and racial stereotypes to the interpretation of African literature and we can well understand its compulsion to slap the demagogue on the novelist, forgetting that, while in the case of the African novelist the two roles exist dangerously close to each other, they seldom overlap, and when they do the novelist loses to the ideologue.

The western response, operating as it does from the standpoint of colonial guilt is usually on the defensive. Novels of empire (*Heart of Darkness*, *Passage to India*, *The Plumed Serpent* and others) could see and even diagnose Imperialism but not finally stand against it, however, much they involved themselves in its inhuman realities. It is an attitude : slightly ill at ease, slightly ashamed but enormously forgiving, rationalizing where necessary, and subtly nagging us into a comforting and easy conscience in the end.

The basic planks of colonial consciousness in the African novel (excluding the dissenting voices) are based on the commanding argument that the Imperial rule in the colonies was the sinister unfolding of a methodically conceived and no less systematically executed plan of action for the subjugation of the black races. The centrality of this argument in shaping the consciousness of the African

novelist is sufficient warrant that the argument be subjected to ruthless analysis.

It is of utmost importance for our purpose to examine the relation between the dominant discourse at the imperial 'centre' and its mirror image the anti-imperial discourse at the 'periphery', because the colonial consciousness at the periphery – at least its most dominant variant – is predicated upon the existence of an official, state sponsored, all pervasive, monolithic imperial discourse. In post colonial times very often the anti-imperial impulse draws its justification, sustenance and combativeness from its antagonistic stance. The kind of rabid nationalism this perceived antagonism breeds, the latitude and licence it accords to the native regimes and the ease with which these regimes orchestrate this facility into elaborate systems of thuggery is too well known to require restating.

To dismantle, then, the bogey of imperial discourse is at once to undercut the foundations of the nativist outrage and to question the tenability of numerous related attitudes.

To begin with, as I have demonstrated in my discussion of Francophone and Anglophone writing the homogeneity and cohesiveness attributed to the imperial discourse on the continent is utter bunkum. Also, in our discussion of attitudes towards the institution

of slavery which was one of the pillar of imperialism we saw how opinions dashed in the open.

In light of these and other evidence discussed in the course of our work my thesis is that the talk of an official imperial discourse is patently ahistorical. The unevenness of the colonized terrain at no time allowed for the homogeneity of a panoptic vision and the discourse from the centre never acquired the austerity and thoroughness of a canon. Even in its most eloquently compact editions it is no more than hypothetical and apocryphal. Most of the time the apparently popular consensus at the metropolitan centre about the fate and administration of the colonies was dictated by the reigning geo-political compulsions.

Two levels of imperial activity are proffered as proof of the fraud perpetrated on the native population by the western powers. One is the annexation, systematic uprooting and denigration of the culture, traditions, customs and institutions of the natives. This, it is believed, was supported on the theoretical plane by doctrines such as Gobineau's on the inequality of the human races or that of Levy Bruhl on the prelogical mentality of the primitive people and had such precursors as Leo Africanus in the sixteenth century according to whom the inhabitants of the black lands were bucolic people without reason, wit or skill and with no experience of anything at all; who lived like brute beasts without law and order. The standard explanation for this has

been that it is one of the postulates of the alleged civilizing mission of the whites and thus a justification for colonial expansion. But the argument as we shall presently see lacks punch and is placed disadvantageously against contrary evidence. No doubt philosophy in the British Isles was heavily impregnated with racism as is obvious from what David Hume wrote in his essay "Of National Characteristics": "I am apt to suspect the Negroes ... to be naturally inferior to white men. There never was a civilized nation by any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation".

But little patient research will reveal that the racial factor was generally incidental to the geo-political or politics-economic imperatives of international politics on the continent. The case of Ireland is illustrative of this paradox. Ireland's proximity to England – both geographical and racial – being what it is the idea of murdering Gaels was from the start considered patriotic, heroic and just and that too with Royal approval. The idea was so pervasive that so humane a poet as Edmund Spenser in his *View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596) was raucously proposing that since the Irish were barbarian scythians most of them should be exterminated.

That the expansionist credo of Imperialism was strictly dictated by evolving geo-political compulsions on the continent is best

demonstrated in the era of high Imperialism i.e. in the post 1870 decades. This was also the period of the imperial push into Africa.

At the imperial centre, interest in the colonies was slight, being lively only among missionary societies and certain trading interests. Until after 1870, national policies and even more national public opinion in most European countries had been hostile to the idea of colonies. Adam Smith had argued that the burdens of colonialism outweighed its alleged benefits. Radicalism becoming increasingly influential in British politics after 1815 favoured laissez-faire, and Cobdenism preached free trade and the abolition of all commercial privileges. It was in 1861 that France opened to all nations the trade of her colonies. Gladstone expected the whole British Empire to dissolve in the end, and in 1852 Disraeli made his famous declaration: 'these wretched colonies will all be independent in a few years and are millstones around our neck'.

But after 1870 the tide of opinion changed abruptly. The chorus of anti-colonialism gave way to hectic colonial scramble. And it can be safely said that the naked power politics of the new colonialism was the projection on to an overseas screen of the inter-state frictions and rivalries of Europe.

The ports of Africa and far East were valuable as naval bases and ports-of-call no less than as in-roads for trade. Given the tangle of international fears and distrusts in Europe during these years and the

hysterical public response that it evoked, and the ever present menace of war, no possible strategic advantage could be forfeited. This accounts in greater part for the realism and ruthlessness of the African expansion.

Yet another – and, I emphasize a very crucial – element in the growth of Imperialism was the administrator and soldier – the man with a mission. Such men became the great colonial proconsuls – Lord Cromer in Egypt, Lord Lugard in Nigeria, Lord Milner at the Cape, Marshal Lyautey in Morocco – and the complexion of local administration changed with the man in charge.

We in India should have little difficulty in appreciating this factor in particular as we had our own share of the Curzons and Wellesleys and Ripons. Even the ascendancy of East India Company and its gradual transformation from a trading outfit into a conglomerate of British political interests was a corollary to Anglo-French rivalry on the continent.

The question here is why it is necessary to consider the sources of the imperial urge. The reason is loud and clear. The entire history of the evolution of colonial consciousness attests to and swears by the malignant ideological core of imperialism, holding it to be both the spark and the dynamo of the sordid saga. In this tainted perspective, the hopelessly ramshackle caravan of Imperialism falsely appears as one

triumphant parade of ideology. To allow the imperial discourse such magisterial cogency or to invest it with the same is to ignore the glaring historical evidence of the existence of a parallel discourse at the centre, adversely oriented to its dominant counterpart and grimly subversive in its adversarial gesture. To assert the latter on the other hand is to substantially tone down the culpability attributable to imperialism.

Achebe never strove, in my view, to write a classic colonial novel, for the quintessential colonial novel could not be written without subscribing to the line of thought we have examined and dismissed. It invariably engenders dichotomized stereotypes leading to Eurocentric schema of dialectical confrontation and categorization.

The latest works of Achebe and Ngugi, *Anthills of the Savannah* and *Petals of Blood* respectively are fully conversant with the crude reality of the post independence African polity. Wole Soyinka, the novelist, almost consciously chooses to intervene at a moment when the initiative for creating history is firmly and irrevocably in African hands. There is the unfortunate legacy of imperialism no doubt but it is there to provide the perspective against which the task of nation building has to go on. Almost all recent studies in the dynamics of post colonial state have noted that eviction of the colonizer and giving shape to the fortunes of an independent nation are two different things calling for two different strategies.

It has been variously shown that almost everywhere successful anti-imperialist nationalism has a history of evasion and avoidance and that nationalism can become a panacea for not dealing with economic disparities, social injustice and the capture of the newly independent states by a nationalist elite. Edward Said avers that once independence was gained new and imaginative reconceptions of society and culture were required in order to avoid the old orthodoxies and injustices. These two then are in broad agreement with Fanon's thesis in the chapter, aptly titled 'The Pitfalls of Nationalist Consciousness' in *The Wretched of the Earth* where he puts forward the notion that unless national consciousness at its moment of success was somehow transformed into a social consciousness the future would hold no liberation but an extension of imperialism. And the biggest road-block to this desired conversion or transformation has been the atavistic revivalism at the core of the nationalist movements.

All the four writers (Chenua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, James Ngugi and Mongo Beti) are fully aware of this phase in the history of the African continent and because of this awareness they successfully negotiated this bend in African history. The recent works of all these four novelists are seized of the problem of the new elite and the intellectual. For all the four writers colonialism in post independence Africa manifests itself in form of this new class relying for its existence and prosperity on sloganised populism which is no more than a means

to camouflage its deep distrust for the masses. Its behaviour and mannerisms are marked for their borrowed etiquettes which ill suits its neopractitioners. Be it His Excellency Sam's behaviour towards the American reporter Miss Cramford in *Anthills of The Savannah* or be it professor Oguazor in Soyinka's *The Intrepreters* it is all symptomatic of the same pathology. Cynicism along with a resigned indifference of a section of masses operating alongside the ruthless expediency and pragmatism of the elite hopelessly complicates the scenario, postponing endlessly the agenda for reform and regeneration.

Achebe duly notes and deplores in the masses what he terms diseased tolerance; "a tolerance verging on admiration by the trudging-jigger toed oppressed for the Mercedes-Benz-driving, private-jet-flying, luxury-yatch-cruising oppressor," and suggests that what is at issue in all this may not be systems after all, "but a basic human failing that may only be alleviated by a good spread of general political experience, slow of growth and obstinately patient".

For Ngugi, however, no such patience; but the Long March Ngugi advocates the storming of the Bastille of corruption; a root and branch hacking of the system which nourishes capitalism – which for Ngugi is only another name for imperialism. He is all for the dictatorship of the proletariat. Soyinka on the other hand is extremely circumspect in listing his preferences openly. But there is sufficient evidence in his

novels to suggest that though grudgingly, he sanctions Ngugi's methods. The clarion call is for the proletariat, the peasants and the workers to initiate an era of socialism.

Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* ends with a wonderful vision of workers and peasants leading the struggle to bring about an end to exploitation and class struggle. As Ngugi sees it, from Koitalel through Kangethe to Kimathi "tomorrow it would be the workers and the peasants leading the struggle and seizing power to overturn the system and all its prying blood thirsty gods and gnomish angels bringing to an end the reign of the few over the many".

Chinua Achebe feels to the core of his convictions that revolutions may be necessary for taking a society out of an untraceable stretch of quagmire but it does not confer freedom and may indeed hinder it. He asserts, "Experience and intelligence warn us that man's progress in freedom will be piecemeal, slow and undramatic. Revolutions are betrayed just as much by stupidity, incompetence, impatience and precipitate action as by doing nothing at all.

One of the most vicious of the many crippling influences of Western domination was the process of 'othering'. Fully realized, Othering meant that for the colonist the native was 'out there', the conspicuous other. These were two different worlds in terms of aspirations, hopes and fears, legal and moral order. However, this

assimilation and conversion. Thus education and religion are the domains of Beti's labour. Beti's vision is comic and so there are no pre-established positives in his novels except for a bolsterous good sense. A comic artist does not set out with a thesis. His vision is hypothetical. Patient observation of the given reality without any prejudice is the soul of a comic writer's art. This roving eye for the most mundane detail pierces through to the kernel of truth and yet the position so reached is provisional. We are on shifting sands of reality. There is no ultimacy in this world where an endless web of pretensions is to be brushed aside and continually deflated in order just to maintain one's tenuous hold on the edges of reality. Once the frills are discarded the tall claims of religion sound hollow.

Beti shows that in the world that he is portraying the self proclaimed arbiters of the fate of the masses, the likes of Rev. Father Drumond are no superhumans but are subject to the same human foibles as are those whom they ostensibly claim to be leading. It is significant though that he does not ridicule the priests and in the various roles that they play vis-a-vis the traditional society - even at their subversive best - Beti underlines their underlying humanity. In all their ventures that wreck havoc on the traditional society these priests are fired by the sense of a mission i.e. they take their vocation seriously. That is why they never degenerate into caricatures.

Thus we see how Beti's treatment of the clergy goes a long way in substantiating my thesis that, although the missionaries took their work seriously they were undone by their inability to decipher the native code. In their bafflement they blundered their way from error to error. This failure at understanding was due mainly to the absence at that time of the idea of existence of non-white cultures and civilizations. These notions were taken as axiomatic and went uncontradicted in the absence of cross-cultural exchanges or cultural encounters. These in time bred pernicious racial and cultural stereotypes which gradually percolated down to popular mind. Yet though for the subjugated races the cultural encounter might have been a nightmare, for the whites it was a profound riddle coming finally to the land of people whom they had known for centuries only as homeless slaves we can understand how difficult it must have been for the white races to digest (or even acknowledge) that these same people could also have an alternative history and culture.

To conclude then we can say that leaving Beti aside – for he forestalls his enrolment in the post colonial perspective by virtue of the period he chooses to write about – the other three novelists whom we have considered in detail, Achebe, Soyinka and Ngugi are all painfully conscious of the 'Pathology of Power' as it stalks the African continent. Their brush with the post colonial reality being so close, their response is utterly contemporary. The colonial consciousness is come of age. For

them there is no consolation of the 'Rhetoric of Blame' for the simple reason that the era of separate identities seems to have run its course and so have the antinomies of race, colour and class.

The Superpowers with their satellite states both in the Eastern and the Western block and later following the collapse the emergence of a unipolar world under the leadership of United States of America have together led to the use of new strategies of colonisation.

It is thus that the vision of the novelists under consideration operates from the pessimistic perspective of the common guilt potential of humanity as in this unusual poem by Denis Brutus :

 Their guilt
 is not so very different from ours:
 who has not joyed in the arbitrary
 exercise of power
 or grasped for himself what might have been
 another's -
 and who has not used superior force in the
 moment when he could (and who of us has
 not been tempted to these things?)
 So, in their guilt,
 The bared ferocity of teeth,
 chest thumping challenge and defiance,

the deafening clamour of their prayers
to a deity made in the image of their prejudice
which drowns the voice of conscience
is mirrored our predicament.

It is the predicament of today's Africa and it faithfully mirrors the tortuous posturing of the post colonial mind in search of a pliant and non-subversive history. It is a consciousness that having re-evaluated the pre-colonial and post-colonial, finds it increasingly difficult to bracket out the colonial as an aberration. It is a consciousness that faults imperialism for having surprised and bullied it into modernity while at the same time accepting the postulates and positive accretions of modernism and science as necessary adjunct to civilizational evolution. It is in all essentials a contemporary consciousness, cursed with modernity.

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